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ヘヴィオブジェクト
THE CRIME OF THOR KUROKUMO
電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations

鎌池和馬
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結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
THE COMING OF THIRD GENERATION 第三世代への道

INDEX

000010 序　章

000012 第一章
天国に一番近い戦争ブローカー
>>クック追加諸島方面諜報戦

000100 第二章
地獄よりも辛い汚れ仕事チーム
>>アサバスカ方面輸送戦

000152 第三章
人間の欲を刺激する陰謀バンク
>>アマゾン方面砲撃戦

000336 終　章

【ブロードスカイサーベル】BROAD SKY SABER

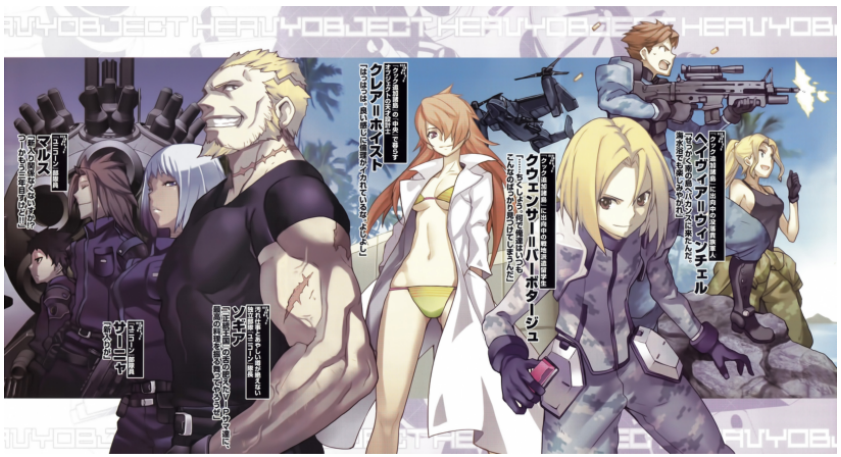
機体にニコラシカ王家の紋章、個人名を示す青と金のリボン装飾を持つ、ディミクシ＝ニコラシカ専用オブジェクト。

足回りは球体状本体の真下に、前後へ長いフロートが二本伸びている。その補助として、左右へ三本ずつ脚のようなパーツが装備され、強制的なブレーキの役割を担う。
動力のメインはエアクッション式で、パーツ換装なしで水陸両用を可能とする。主砲は球体状本体の前面から突き出された六門の砲とされている。後部には、まるで巨大な剣を背負うように、鉄塔にも似たユニットが取り付けられているが、その用途は不明。

この最先端オブジェクト「ブロードスカイサーベル」は、レーザービーム主体の「第三世代」であるが、ディミクシ自身は「ついに時代は「第三世代」を迎えた」と声明を発表している。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

name / Fiatvia Nikolaevska
age / 14
sex / female
place of birth / Moscow, Ladoga
height / 154cm
weight / 47kg
body size / 78cm-57cm-81cm
belong / The Federation of Nikolaevska
hair color / blonde
eye color / deep purple
EMOTIONLESS HEAVY


ヘイヴィア＝ウィンチェル
クウェンサー＝バーボタージュ
クレア＝ホイスト
マルス
サーニャ
ゾンビ

クリーンな時代のクリーンな戦争。
さてと、この戦争もいい加減に飽きてきたな。
そろそろ全部ぶっ壊しちまおうぜ。

――とある研究者のつぶやき

HEAVY OBJECT

THE COMING OF THIRD GENERATION

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
死の祭典

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Clean wars in a clean age.

In and of itself, that is not a bad thing. But it is not good to remain stagnant. I've never heard of things turning out well when that happens.

Objects rule the battlefield nowadays. And the second generation ones have an overwhelming advantage over the first generation ones. It probably isn't long before the exact formula for victory is worked out and wars leave the actual battlefields and are worked through like board games.

That's no fun.

The equation for victory would gather wealth in one place, and financial stagnation brings about the decay we know too well.

Neither this age nor its wars can be called "clean". I'm not trying to say we need war and I'm not trying to make some laughable indulgences that justify war as good. But this world will never be rid of war. We may change what form it takes, but we will never be rid of it. And so I think the quality of the age we live in can be determined by whether we bring our inevitable wars to a cleaner state or not.

The victims should be kept to a minimum, and the victory and wealth that naturally remains stagnant in one place should be stirred up and moved around.

That is my idea of a clean war.

But that will be difficult with the existing Objects. We know almost all the values regarding both the first and second generation Objects. Just like with financial trading programs, something that has achieved optimization will only produce stagnation.

A new game piece is needed.

Something is needed that will break the bottom out of the optimization that is being built up.

I'm sure someone will achieve it eventually, but I hate having to wait. I figure it will be fastest if I complete it myself.

I've grown sick of these wars.

It's about time I destroyed it all.

Chapter 1: The War Broker Closest to Heaven > > Intelligence Battle in the Cook District

Part 1

“I can’t cover for you two anymore. Go off for a bit to cool your heads.”

The blazing sun made it easy to forget it was January.

Quenser used the sleeve of his military uniform to wipe away the sweat on his face on a solitary island in the southern hemisphere of the Pacific Ocean.

“Why have we just been shooting and shooting for so long? Are we feeding the fish lead food?”

“We’re using brand new bullets for shooting practice. It’s about time for the accounts to be settled. If we don’t use up the excess bullets now, the defense budget will be cut down for the next fiscal year,” said Heivia sounding a bit bored as he fired a rifle next to Quenser in a decent-looking pose.

“Are you making things up with no proof again?”

“The fact that they gave an amateur like you a rifle is proof enough. That means this ‘homework’ is the only thing left for us to do. Shit, how many tens of thousands was our quota today?”

The Cook Addition Islands.

It was a part of Legitimacy Kingdom territory. It fell into the category of a small safe country.

It was actually made up of a number of islands floating in the Pacific Ocean, but only the small island in the center was natural land. Or rather, the area around one of the small islands on the edge of the archipelago had been thoroughly developed. Artificial land similar to offshore oil platforms dotted the area around that island. The individual islands were connected by giant bridges like the Information Alliance’s Miami. Most of the islands were used as testing grounds for Objects and storage areas for supercomputers, so

all of the soldiers lived on a single island.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others were on land made of steel. They were leaning over the handrail and firing rifles at targets attached to boats that moved around by radio control.

They had made small but repeated mistakes.

They had accomplished many great achievements that put bitter expressions on faces of the higher ups in the military.

It seemed that had all exceeded what their sexy commander (as they called her) Froleytia could handle and so they had been "transferred" away from the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

This was conventionally called being demoted, being sent to sit by the window, or being kept out of the way.

"Welcome to the peace humanity has won," said a blonde woman firing a carbine with zero motivation.

She had completed removed the top of her camouflage uniform, leaving only a tank top on her upper body. The top she did not need in that heat was tied around her waist. The two boys enjoyed watching her thanks to all the jiggling caused when she fired her weapon.

"So what did you two do to get yourselves sent out here?"

"We showed off our good looks and skills too much and made some people jealous."

"That's dangerous. That's the fastest way to earn yourself an early grave."

He received a serious reply to his joke.

Quenser gulped, but Heivia's rifle had jammed, so he shouted out like someone tossing a video game controller to the side.

"Dammit!! Shooting each individual bullet like this is such a pain in the ass! At this rate, the year will be over before we finish. Someone

bring out the Crocodile!! We need to use a Gatling gun!!"

"But the Crocodile is 30 mm, right?" said the blonde tank-topped woman with a grin.

She must have been used to seeing soldiers have their spirit worn down like this.

With a puzzled look, Quenser asked, "So why are you here?"

"I'm Genelia, a marriage scam artist. Nice to meet you!"

"…Oh, wow."

"I pretend to have noble blood to make money. I never thought that the money box I met in that bar would be the idiotic son of some high ranking member of the military. I got in a lot of trouble for that. As a result, I've been moved around among the harshest battlefields in the world."

"Wait, wait, wait! This is one of the harshest battlefields in the world?" cut in Heivia as he tried to take apart the assault rifle to fix the jam and ended up burning his fingers on the hot barrel. "I thought they would gather a team of people they want to get rid of and send them out into the mountains on what is supposed to be an anti-terror mission. But the team would intentionally be given the wrong information so they would attack some villain's hideout. That way the higher ups can eliminate any allies they want without worrying about how skilled they are."

"When you do that, you have to pay a pension to the families. These days, the higher ups pay close attention to how much tax money they spend. Other than what they waste on themselves, of course."

"This island is surrounded by the blue ocean and summer lasts year round. Genius Object designers live here. It is protected by 4 second generation Objects. This is heaven on earth and quite possibly the safest place in the world. What about it is harsh?"

"Because it is so peaceful, there is nothing to do." Genelia fired repeatedly out towards the ocean to fill her quota. "When people

earn the ire of the military, it is usually because they have a strong individual streak, right? Maybe they refuse to shoot children or they claim it is a subordinate's job to stop a commander who is doing something wrong. Well, those kinds of ideals will rot away in no time on this island. After all, they don't let you do anything."

"…"

"During the first few months, you will be afraid that you are growing rusty and try to rehone your skills with independent training. But it's no use. It's too late. Both your mind and body will already be slowing. Here we have delicious food, air-conditioned private rooms, video games, a fully stocked bar, and lots of high quality cigars. …Once you get a taste of this, you'll never want to go back to the jungle or the desert. They didn't have online stores in Napoleon's age, but if he was given a chance to use them for a while, he would never want to go back to the 18th century or the 19th century or whenever it was."

That was how it was "harsh".

Quenser and Heivia finally understood what kind of place they had been sent to.

"In other words, this island is a diplomatic way of urging us to retire?"

"That's what it means to be sent to sit by the window. If the higher ups fire you directly, they have to spend more on severance pay. So instead they give you just enough work to justify minimum wage. There are only three patterns for the people sent here. Some continue the futile struggle against growing rusty, some begin thinking of retirement before the rust reaches the core of their bodies, and some decide to accept the rust and just enjoy themselves with the taxpayer's money."

"Is that really okay?" Heivia looked over towards the central island. "The most famous designers in the Legitimacy Kingdom are gathered here. Should they really use this as a place to let delinquent soldiers rot? It sounds more like the place for some ultimate special forces to me."

“Oh, they do have a mysterious elite unit,” replied Genelia offhand. “The Night Edge Platoon. Sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? It’s like they’re trying to sound cool. But they do protect everything well enough. And that just makes the rest of us feel all the more useless. Apparently the Night Edge Platoon swaps out its members every few months to prevent them from growing rusty. I guess this is like a vacation for them. But they’re dangerous. Really dangerous. If you tried to talk to one of them like this, you could easily get your throat slit.”

“I saw them. Even in this 40 degree heat, they had their heads completely covered in black masks. I doubt you could ever have a proper conversation with that kind of honor student.”

“But the military wants that kind of ‘honor student’ that never makes any complaints. After all, the exact same amount of the people’s tax money goes to those honor students as goes to the problem students.”

“Keh. They aren’t the legendary White Bears that disappeared in a South American desert. Y’know, that 115th Independent Royal Guard Company. Soldiers that follow their commander’s orders with no complaint like that are rare.”

“You mean those elites from the Volga District? The ones said to be knights working to protect a young princess from wicked politicians? From what I heard, they could have a movie made out of them.”

“Yeah, they like to make entertainment out of the tragedies of war. …Come to think of it, a movie would probably work out great since Princess Staivia is so popular. I hear they sell photographs of her in front of the palace in Moscow.”

“Are they all pedophiles or something?”

“If you said that in Volga plaza, you’d get shot.”

Quenser and Heivia had digressed into pointless chatter, so Genelia spoke up to bring them back on track.

“With delinquent soldiers like us, the tax money spent to pay us is considered wasted and they do not want to pay the pension to our families if we died. And so the higher ups want to find another way to get us out of the military.”

“If they want to save money, wouldn’t it be easier to tear out the fattened hearts of those higher ups?”

“You do realize that kind of comment is what led you to be a target for cutbacks, right?”

(How many months will we be stuck here? No, how many months will we last?)

With that offhand thought, Quenser continued to shoot his rifle out to sea. It was not as bad as the mythological Japanese children’s limbo, but being forced to do completely useless work with seemingly no end in sight was a way of harassing soldiers and wearing down their spirits. It was similar to the method used in prisons during the middle ages.

Of course, Quenser and Heivia both had their individual goals and they had joined the military to accomplish those goals.

And so this was no time for them to be sent out into the middle of nowhere just so the higher ups could harass them.

But…

“This place is filled with genius Object designers, right? Heivia, you may be out of luck, but this shouldn’t be too bad for me. In fact, I can probably learn a lot.”

“You idiot! That stuff is at the highest level of classification. You’ll never get to see any of it! It isn’t something you can just sneak a peek at like the women’s bath!!”

“I can just ask them while in bed. If you like, I can give you a lecture on what I learn.”

Those two problem students would probably never shut their mouths even if they were sent to Mars, and they were as energetic

as ever. As they focused more on chatting than firing their rifles, a bit of static ran through their radios, immediately followed by an announcement.

“Quenser Barbotage. Calling battlefield student Quenser Barbotage who recently transferred from the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. As per the instructions of one of the researchers, you are to head to the Center as soon as possible.”

“…What? Am I being called to the principal’s office for a lecture?”

“The Center is a gathering of genius girls. It’s a lot like a girl’s school. In all seriousness, I hear it is 100% female! Dammit! Yet again I get left behind for this scrawny intellectual!! There’s something wrong with this world. Is god jealous of my good looks!?”

“It looks like your chance to take one of them to bed is already here,” said Genelia. “Well, I’m sure the Night Edge Platoon can’t believe this either. So be careful, okay?”

“Be careful about what? Those scaaaary trainers from Night Edge?”

“Do you know what this place is called? The nursery,” said Genelia with a grin. “And that isn’t because of us. It’s because of the genius designers in the Center. The top levels of the military can’t handle them either. They’re geniuses, so the military doesn’t want to lose them, but they’re too much trouble to keep nearby. This heaven in the Cook Addition Islands was created to gather all of them in a single place.”

“…So that building is filled with perverts?”

“And they have enough individual talent to force their way past the general wisdom of society. The very fact that a newcomer like you is being invited into that top secret facility should be proof enough. Normally, the Night Edge Platoon would remove your head in the name of preventing the leakage of classified information if you so much as approached that facility without going through the proper procedures.”

“I hope I get to meet the kind of pervert that walks around wearing nothing but a lab coat. That hope is of course limited to girls.”

“Oh, come on now. You’d be too shocked to stand if you actually saw that.”

Part 2

With the exception of the guards, the central island was supposedly populated solely by around 30 genius girls.

From the outside, it looked like a giant concrete military building, but it supposedly had very little sense of cohabitation. This was due to the residents being perverts. If they possessed personalities that allowed them to function within the normal gears of society, they would supposedly never have been sent to the “nursery”. For that reason, the genius girls supposedly primarily lived in personal rooms with only a few areas such as the labs with electron microscopes and other equipment shared between them. The various members would supposedly only meet each other while passing each other in the long passageways.

The repeated use of “supposedly” came from the fact that all this information came from Genelia who had never actually seen the inside of the Center. Quenser had no idea what connections she had used to get the information, but it was all things she had heard secondhand.

“Tch.”

When Quenser arrived in front of the thick door that looked strong enough to withstand an all-out war, the members of the Night Edge Platoon with black masks over their faces blatantly clicked their tongues.

“No guns, no blades, no explosives, no drugs, no germs, and nothing else either. I’d like to break your nose and that tiny thing in your pants for good measure, but I doubt you’ll get a chance to use it.”

“How about you remove that hairy hand and its hairy fingers from my neck? What the hell? Are you a mutant created after being exposed to some kind of space power or something? Isn’t that dirty sweat of yours the most dangerous thing that someone could bring in here?”

Quenser's cocky comment earned him a punch to the cheek.

"Don't try to act so tough, tax thief. Get inside and cause some trouble. Then I don't have to hold back and I can just shoot you."

Quenser raised his middle finger and entered the building.

Unlike a department store or a shopping mall, there was no guide map posted. The long passageways with rooms lining either side reminded him of a library's bookshelves or a school's shoe lockers.

The shorthair carpet and faint indirect lighting were just like a hotel's. Without a guide map, Quenser had no way of knowing what was a private room and what was a laboratory. The system made it clear that was something only those living there needed to know.

"…There's stuff piled up everywhere."

The passageways were much too cluttered to be those of a high-class hotel. Or perhaps a hotel would look like this during cleaning time when the carts and cleaning supplies were brought out.

Some places simply had trash piled up, but some places had things like a dartboard hanging down from the ceiling by a string. Quenser even spotted some small dragonfly and rhinoceros beetle shaped robots clinging to the wall. It looked like a case where those in charge of cleaning up could not tell what was needed and what was not and so were too afraid to carelessly clean up any of it.

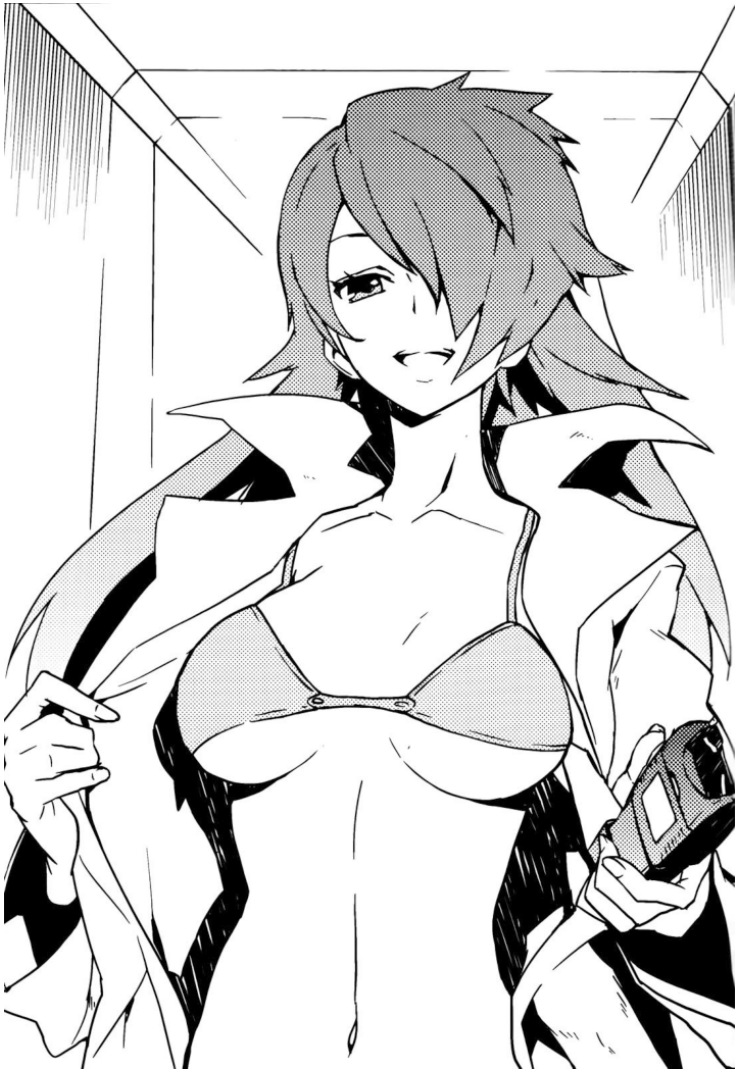
"Quenser. Quenser Barbotage."

A female voice came his way from somewhere along the "library shelf". Quenser turned toward the voice and saw a woman in her twenties stepping out into the passageway from an open door.

She had an odd appearance.

She wore a lab coat long enough to reach her ankles and a brightly-colored bikini. Her hair was long, brown, and simply left spread out without tying it in any way. Quenser was pretty sure lab coats were meant to show stains and chemicals easily and to protect one's body, but he could not imagine what purpose there was behind her

outfit's coordination. It reminded him of the legendary bikini armor.



Quenser shouted out, "I thought this was a collection of genius 'girls'!!"

"Huh? That's the first thing you latch onto? …Um, c'mon now. Don't cry, don't cry. Look: tits."

“I’m fine with that part!! Now, I know we could never get married or be lovers, but let’s at least fuck!!”

“Hah hah hah. I see your morals have been nicely thrown out of order. There, there.”

With a generous smile, the woman accurately pulled a stun gun out of an inner pocket of her lab coat and threatened Quenser with it. That finally brought him back to his senses.

“Who are you?”

“Claire. I’m the Object designer Claire Whist. I heard you aspire to be one too.”

“…”

“Well, I guess it won’t feel real so suddenly. Unlike the pilot Elites, the designer’s identities are kept a secret. That makes it easier to prevent terrorist attacks on us.”

Quenser was unsure what to say, but Claire used her thumb to point toward the open door.

“Come with me. I called you here because I have something to discuss with you. I think it will be a beneficial discussion for you.”

The room was about 10 meters square.

It did not have much in it. It had a bed and a desk. Something like a complexly folded plastic board sat in one corner of the room. It resembled a giant controller for a robot game modeled after a cockpit. There were also a few shelves. The shelves were lined with several Object miniatures.

“They don’t move,” said Claire. “But their construction is almost identical to the real ones. It’s just that the reactors don’t function at that size. If you pursue perfection too far, a fundamental part tends to fail.”

“You make them here?”

“Why do you ask?”

“But…this is where you work? I thought it would be filled with all sorts of strange tools.”

“The people researching the materials would have a bunch of those. These days, all the action is in strengthening the materials for room-temperature superconductors. They’re busy mixing alloys and boiling wine.” Claire Whist opened a small refrigerator and pulled out a small juice box. “Designers can get by with a single computer. That’s why we’re wanted for our brains. And that laptop is connected to a supercomputer in another room, so I can handle everything quite easily.”

However, she had two laptops sitting on her desk.

When Quenser pointed that out, Claire smiled and said, “The other one is for my hobbies. How else would I get this swimsuit? The military’s fashion sense is just hopeless. …But I use it for stock and futures trading more than I do for online shopping.”

“…I thought designers made tons of money.”

“People will always aim for more. And so all that money doesn’t seem like enough.”

The numbers for some kind of trading were lined up on the screen. Even if it was not on her work computer, Quenser wondered if it was okay for someone with as much highly classified information as an Object designer to have free access to the internet.

“We’re allowed a restricted access to the internet. The line first passes through a military checkpoint. It’s a small lag, but it does work to my disadvantage in these trades.”

“…What are you trading here? Stocks?”

“Clouds.”

“So it’s a weather forecast?”

“No, no. Clouds are a wonderful resource. They’re a type of water

resource. They take in the seawater and carry it as freshwater. Normally, the clouds created over the sea are carried by the wind and begin dropping rain when they hit the mountains. But these days, we can artificially control the amount of rain. Just as civilization developed around rivers, the age is coming where civilization will develop along the paths of the clouds. And once that happens," said Claire, "competition will naturally begin. Look. This is the market for southern Africa. The amount of clouds flowing through the sky is set, but the rain could come down anywhere. If it rains on Area A, Area B beyond it will dry up. Clouds disappear after they rain, after all."

"…I see. So just like the world-famous rivers, the flow of the clouds crosses national borders?"

"Would Area A naturally give up on the rain and let the clouds move on to Area B? If they don't get any water, they will dry up too. They will have no drinking water or food. Its people will wither away to nothing. And they have the technology to make it rain at their fingertips. So would it be right to sit idly by and do nothing? Human life or the laws of nature? Which one should they protect?"

"…"

"It's a difficult question, isn't it? And our response is to find the right answer for the right spot. There is no cut and dried answer. Some are trying to create a system to efficiently distribute water through underground channels at the same time, some are trying to focus the rain on the areas with rare plants, and some are trying to make it rain on the areas with high water retention. Some are even working with corporations to create giant tanks and pools. The complex movements of all these people has created a flow of money we call the water resources market. But you don't need to worry about any of that."

Object designs and investments.

In both cases, her weapon was nothing more than a computer.

"So you only do the pure designs? You don't create new materials when you fail?"

“If I need something, I make a request to an expert in that field. That’s much faster. And if I just need something that works on paper, I can let the supercomputer calculate it out. I use the computer to calculate out an ideal new material that would fill the hole in a design and attach that to an email I send to one of the specialists in the other rooms. They’re the ones who make it by hand. That’s more or less how it works.”

Claire Whist passed a grape juice box to Quenser, stabbed a straw into her own, and sat in a chair next to the desk.

“Hold it against your cheek. Is it swollen because of the Night Edge Platoon?”

“It scares me that hysteric bastards like that are allowed to carry weapons.”

“A weapon is only as effective as the person who wields it,” said Claire offhandedly. “Well, they’re a lot like you, just of a different type. They’re good at what they do, but they throw punches as much as a health nut drinks mineral water. It was decided they aren’t needed in the modern smart and clean military. Since the military hates both of you, how about you try to get along?”

(This place really is a nursery through and through.)

Quenser had that thought, but he decided not to say it out loud.

Incidentally, pressing the juice box against his cheek did little to help. He decided to just stab the straw in instead.

“To be honest, it is no coincidence that you are here.”

“Eh? Well, yes. I was called here by you, right?”

“That’s not what I mean. It wasn’t my decision to have you sent off somewhere out of the way thanks to your troublesome actions, but I did influence the decision for this to be where you were sent. I wanted to be able to speak with you like this.”

“…”

It was simple enough to say.

But Quenser had no idea if that was actually possible.

“Anyway, I want to get down to business. So what do you think?”

“About what?”

“About Objects. You’ve dealt with first generation and second generation ones now, right?”

“There was also that 0.5 generation one.”

“That one doesn’t even count as an Object in our minds.”

Claire gave a scornful laugh.

She pulled a laser pointer out of a penholder on the table. Its red light pointed at one of the models lined up on the shelves.

“I most want to hear about this one. You should know this model very well.”

“…The Tri-Core?”

Quenser and Heivia had once sunk that Object in the Strait of Gibraltar. Its primary feature was its 3 giant reactors and its ability to drill for and transport oil.

Claire Whist spun the point of light around in a circle.

“I didn’t design that one, but this model was constructed based on the information received by a probe sent deep into the ocean. It’s only just barely 70% complete. Frankly, that isn’t enough. And that area of sea is packed with deep sea probes from the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization. Everyone is trying to search further and stop the others, so they are all very busy.”

“What’s so special about it?”

“You can’t tell?” Claire sipped on some grape juice through her

straw. “Modern wars are decided by the number of Objects. Individual ability can create a gap, but the difference made by numbers is overwhelming. Once it reaches one against three, it is hopeless. In that case, it is better to retreat without fighting. And yet…”

“Oh.”

“The Tri-Core has three reactors on a single Object. Normally, it would be much more effective to create three different Objects out of them. And it is now nothing but scrap at the bottom of the sea. …Ideas for oddities like this will often surface, but they are never actually constructed. The will of the many moves the military. And it is the people’s tax money that moves these projects. Any oddity that was suggested in the past has been stopped at some point or another.”

“And yet the Tri-Core was created as a single Object with three reactors on it…”

“That’s the key.” Claire smiled. “You could call it the path to the third generation. The Tri-Core made it no further than what I suppose we could call generation 2.5, but its uniqueness holds the possibility to change the battlefield. Every military tries to analyze any defeated Object, but the focus on the Tri-Core is unusually high. The top designers from each world power are probably focused on it. …In other words, the shape of the Objects that support these wars could change soon. It won’t make it to the next designs, but it is possible the ones after that will show a clear influence from it.”

The third generation.

Quenser had experienced firsthand just how demonic the current second generation could be, so it was not something he could simply celebrate. It was like a test of courage. He very much wanted to hurry up and become a designer so he could be on the side of those frightening everyone else.

But at the same time…

“But the probes are still investigating the Tri-Core, right? What do you need me for? I doubt anything I know will help you complete that model.”

“No, no. That’s not it at all. I just wanted to hear your impressions of it.”

“My impressions?”

“Your impressions after fighting it.” Claire Whist held her juice box against her head and enjoyed its coolness. “The third generation we anticipate will truly be ground-breaking. But it will be useless if it we focus too much on our design ideals and it ends up being useless on the battlefield. And so I wanted to ask you. What did you think of the Tri-Core? Did it do a job worthy of having three reactors?”

“I see…” Quenser glanced up at the ceiling and thought back. “Every Object I’ve seen has been like a demon, but for this one, I think the weight was the real problem.”

“Hm, hm.”

“In fact, I don’t think it would have been able to function if it hadn’t been on the ocean. It couldn’t completely evade the Baby Magnum’s bombardment and instead defended itself by moving areas with exceptionally thick armor into the blasts.”

“So it would be difficult to use in strategies requiring speed?”

“Yes. I’m sure it could get up to a nice top speed, but it couldn’t get any bursts of speed. For that reason, it would probably be best for it to use the output of its reactors for one-shot kills.”

“But the reports say that the Baby Magnum’s damage spread slowly.”

“It may have not specialized enough in one direction to be functional in battle.”

“I see.” Claire leaned back in her chair. “I’d say it was too much to try to put an entire oil facility on it. We need to be careful not to make a similar mistake.”

“Um…So will the third generation be made of Objects that have multiple reactors like the Tri-Core?”

“No. In fact, it is because that did not solve the problem that I said the Tri-Core was only generation 2.5.”

“…?”

Quenser was confused.

He opened his mouth to speak.

“Then what is the third generation?”

“You have already seen it,” said Claire Whist joyfully. “And it might become the mainstream form for Objects in the new wars to come.”

Part 3

Meanwhile, Heivia was quite angry.

“I don’t like it. I don’t like it, I don’t like it, I! Don’t! Like! It!!”

Genelia the marriage scam artist smiled while watching Heivia turn the target on the ocean into Swiss cheese using his assault rifle.

“Oh, oh. Amazing, amazing. That should help clear out the stockpile of ammunition. Everyone, do your best to piss off Heivia here!”

“While I’m out here dripping with sweat and wasting bullets, that bastard is getting a lecture directly related to his dream in an air-conditioned room! That isn’t right! And that place is a collection of genius girls. That really, really isn’t right!!”

“Y’know, it isn’t like every single one of them falls under the category of ‘genius girl’. And even if they do, there’s no rule saying they have to be good looking.”

“But when there are girls involved, it’s supposed to be my time to shine! Why doesn’t anyone understand that!?”

“Um, I am a girl, you know.”

“Fuck, fuuucckkkk!!”

Once he saw the target fall to pieces and come clean off the pillar attaching it to the boat, he stopped firing. Instead, he switched on his radio.

“Can you hear me, Mr. Knight!? Can we finally get the man most suited for the job in there where he belongs!?”

“That building is completely cut off to prevent any classified information from being leaked out.”

Part 4

“Oh, right,” said Claire Whist as she crushed the juice box in her hand after finishing off the grape juice. “I wanted to ask you about one other Object as well.”

“Which one?”

“The Baby Magnum.”

Claire’s voice had a nostalgic ring when she spoke that name.

But when she continued, a dangerous tone joined it.

“I have heard about the successes of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. But not all of those successes were successes of the Baby Magnum. Is that correct?”

“Well…”

“If so, that’s a bit of a problem.” Claire gave a small sigh. “That first generation’s design was a bit removed from the mainstream design, but I was still involved in designing it. To be honest, I use it as a prime example of my work. I don’t like constantly hearing about the Baby Magnum losing. At this rate, I’m going to have to change what example I use.”

“The princess is doing a great job! If the Baby Magnum hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t be alive today. Not to mention that a few conspiracies might have been carried out and the world would be a complete mess now!”

“But it is the higher ups of the military that make those decisions. The victory or loss of an Object can bring a war to an end, and they want to construct and maintain that system. I may not agree with them, but even a moronic customer is a customer. I need to take measures against any damage to my reputation.”

“Does a designer have enough power to directly influence a battalion made up of thousands of people?”

“Isn’t that why you aspire to be one? For the money and power? I helped design the Baby Magnum. If I reported there was a defect in it, it would at least be pulled off the front lines for inspection. That would probably last six months to a year. And that would buy me enough time to make my next move. For example, it is an outdated first generation Object. Several high officials want to get rid of it and spend the money on a second generation Object.”

“…”

“If you don’t want that, you need to get them working harder,” said Claire casually while tossing the crushed juice box into the trash can. “A lot more people than you think have their names on the line in these large projects. And that’s all I have to say.”

With that, the conversation was brought to an end.

Claire had either lost interest or was simply never very sociable because she showed no sign that she intended to show him out. Quenser left the room on his own and let out a slight sigh.

An Object designer.

That was a one-way ticket to being one of the few winners in life. Even a commoner could make more money than a lower level noble.

And yet he could not deny that she had seemed somehow constrained to him. It was true Claire Whist had been sent to this island because she was troublesome even for a designer, but even so…

(That also means that even a designer has to constantly make sure not to anger the top levels of the military.)

A restricted freedom.

Authority as just one portion of the gears.

When he thought about it rationally, that was the standard way the world of adults worked and those designers sat in the very center of the military with its strict hierarchical relationships and all that

classified information. There was simply no way someone in the middle of all that could just live a carefree life.

“But at the same time…”

That was not to say he had been disillusioned in his dream of being a designer. Or rather, he ran into the fundamental question of what other path there was for him if he gave up on becoming a designer. In the end, he still wanted that money whether he would be free or not. There were not that many opportunities for a commoner to stand in the spotlight.

But…

There was an even greater reason Quenser felt like his time had been wasted.

He had spoken face to face with Claire, a leading designer. He had seen where she worked. He had even been able to touch her miniature Objects.

And yet he had not gotten anything out of it.

There had been plenty there. It had been a veritable mountain of treasure. Someone who worked on the front lines of design would have found tons of data. But Quenser had been unable to take in any of it even with it right before his eyes. It was like not being able to tell the difference in flavor between two dishes but pretending to be able to. …When it came down to it, he was nothing more than an amateur student. He had not reached the level of an expert designer.

That difference in ability made him falter.

He felt like a mountain climber who discovered what he thought was the peak was nothing more than a small outcropping halfway up.

“I guess I should head back,” whispered Quenser as he walked down the passageway.

While he headed for the exit through that building that reminded

him of a library's shelves or a school's shoe lockers, his mouth started to feel sticky. It was likely due to the grape juice Claire had given him.

The long, straight passageway allowed him to see a good distance away. At what was probably a corner of the building, he spotted a coffee vending machine.

Once he left the building, he would probably be right back to wasting the stockpiled bullets with an assault rifle. From the sparkle he had seen in that Night Edge Platoon's eyes, he doubted he would get any water anytime soon out there.

Deciding to drink some iced coffee or something to clear out his mouth before leaving, Quenser walked toward the vending machine in the corner of the building. It was the old style that used paper cups, but it must have been popular with the genius girls (or women) because it had the stains characteristic of a well-used machine.

He put a few coins into the machine and waited for the iced coffee to fill the paper cup. As he waited, he heard some static come from his small radio.

It quickly turned into a voice.

"Dammit, Quenser! How long are you going to slack off inside that air-conditioned building!? Don't tell me you really are trying to negotiate with them in bed! That isn't like you! You should be mass producing wasted ammunition with your right hand instead!!"

"…I'm gonna punch that idiot once I get back out there," vowed Quenser quietly, but then he frowned.

The building was filled with classified information related to Object design. Naturally, they would make sure data could not get in or out. Claire Whist had told him her internet line went through military surveillance before it got out.

Quenser's radio and cell phone had not been confiscated at the entrance, so he had assumed the building was covered with

materials that cut off any electromagnetic signals.

No, it definitely was.

He slowly reached out to touch the wall. It felt the same. But he clearly felt something different when he reached a hand behind the coffee vending machine.

“The material meant to block the signal was taken out, so it was repainted here recently.”

A blank spot.

A hole.

After thinking about what that mean, Quenser muttered, “Has someone set things up so they can leak classified information?”

Part 5

The wind grew stronger.

As Heivia and the others continued to dispose of the stockpile of bullets, a man wearing a black mask shouted angrily at them from behind.

“Hurry it up, you tax thieves! You’re nothing but trash. You have to keep working until you finish your quota even if a storm blows in or you have to continue into tomorrow!!”

Heivia clicked his tongue and the marriage scam artist muttered quietly to him.

“How about you ‘accidentally’ shoot him?”

“If I knew some technique to fire a gun 180 degrees behind me, I could probably sell it to an action movie director.”

The Night Edge Platoon had not been charged with watching over them. It seemed the man was simply shouting at everyone he came across. He had already headed off somewhere else.

Heivia made sure to raise his middle finger to the man’s parting back, but then he realized something.

“Hey, you said they’re the Night Edge Platoon, right?”

“They’re famous for going overboard while acting as bodyguards for VIPs. The councilors they guarded didn’t like how the excessive violence caused their approval ratings to drop. But that’s no reason to send them out to inspect the battlefields. They just get in the way.”

“…Well, they don’t look like it.”

“?”

Genelia frowned and Heivia ran his thumb across his throat as if

slitting it.

“That guy must have given in to the heat because he lifted his black mask up a little. That’s when I saw it. He had scars from stiches circling around his neck. He’s from the 202nd Mobile Support Company. They go by the name Unicorn and that’s their distinguishing sign. Apparently it symbolizes their decision to ‘kill’ their former self and be reborn upon entering the unit.”

“You’re saying that’s not the Night Edge Platoon but some other unit?” Genelia sounded skeptical. “Maybe someone left Unicorn and joined Night Edge. I hear people often regret it when they try to unite their unit with tattoos.”

“Sure, if it was just him.” Heivia removed the scope from his assault rifle and handed it to Genelia. “Look at the one over there and the one jogging on the bridge. Check around their necks. They have the same scars.”

“…You’re right.”

“You could be right and they officially changed units. But the percentage is just too high. For all intents and purposes, they’ve only changed their name and are still Unicorn.”

“So who is this Unicorn?”

“They have a lot of dark rumors. Their official mission is to destroy enemy lifelines. They’ll blow up trucks carrying supplies whether they’re military or civilian, they’ll destroy public facilities such as bridges or phone towers, and they’ll cut off communications with jamming. They make tons of money behind the scenes of the clean wars.” Heivia took the scope back from Genelia and reattached it to his assault rifle. “They’re an independent unit that ignores their allies’ opinions and carries out whatever destruction they deem necessary for their allies to win in these clean wars between Objects. They do a lot of things that can’t be made public, so they usually remain undercover. There is even suspicion that they have set up a side business with spies from the Capitalist Corporations in the process. Supposedly, they were involved in some attacks on gold mines and black market weapons sales in battlefield

countries."

"They certainly sound dangerous. …But this a top secret facility filled with top Object designers. What are they doing here disguised as the Night Edge Platoon?"

"Who knows. But if they didn't have to hide their presence here, they wouldn't go to the effort. This might be related to their side business with the Capitalist Corporations. Simple honor students are annoying enough to deal with, but Unicorn is an entirely different kind of dangerous. This goes beyond wondering if they'll betray us. They might not even be on the side of the Legitimacy Kingdom in the first place. Who knows when they'll shoot us in the back."

Heivia decided it was best to assume the platoon going by the name Night Edge had been absorbed into the company known as Unicorn.

Naturally, all the Unicorn members spread out across the world would be sharing information between themselves.

Having the Night Edge Platoon hiding their identity inside the collection of classified information that was the Cook Addition Islands was a very, very bad situation.

That was when a tone came from Heivia's radio.

Not long before, it had become nothing but a karaoke microphone toy he shouted abuse over to relieve his stress, but now some unwelcome information came from it.

"Hey, Heivia. I'm inside that building filled with top secret information right now. What do you think about the fact that the signal is reaching you?"

"Not good…" Heivia brought a hand to his forehead. "I found something bad on my end of things too. That impertinent Night Edge Platoon has been swapped out for a different unit called Unicorn. That's the unit suspected to have a secret side business with the Capitalist Corporations!"

"Wait, wait, wait! You don't mean…!!"

“That’s right, you idiot. If data is being sent back and forth under the military’s radar doing exactly what you’re doing, then it’s possible one of the designers in there is working with the Capitalist Corporations!!”

“By the way, it was a coincidence we ended up getting sent off somewhere, but it seems one of those designers influenced where we were sent. So could the same have happened with the Night Edge Platoon?”

“Probably. A designer could have influenced things to gather the pawns she needed.”

“Dammit. Why do we always stumble onto things like this?”

“It’s the curse of those who are just too skilled and good looking. It can’t be long before they make a movie about us.”

The situation had grown troublesome.

A designer inside the thick walls of the building was sending signals out via radio and Unicorn was receiving them outside. If the information was then sent off the island with some larger equipment, a hotline between the designer and the Capitalist Corporations could be constructed.

And on top of that, the “justice” of that small island was completely controlled by Unicorn disguised as Night Edge and the designers in the Center. If the two were working together, the proper law and military regulations would not necessarily come into play if Heivia and the others made a fuss about it.

They had to search out a communications device or line out of the island that was not controlled by the enemy and use that to report the situation elsewhere. And if the enemy tried to stop them, they would of course ignore the usual methods and attack.

Genelia then started tugging on Heivia’s sleeve.

“But there are around 30 genius girls living inside that building, right? Do we know who to suspect?”

“We just have to follow Unicorn’s actions. Not all of them are here on the island. Even the entirety of the Night Edge Platoon would only make up a third of Unicorn. The main body of the unit is elsewhere.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because of all the dark rumors. There are journalists that figure they don’t have to worry about putting food on the table if they just follow Unicorn around. Then again, some have gotten killed for getting too close. Their area of activity can be found on normal news sites.”

“It may not be as bad as where Quenser is, but this place isn’t so lax that we can just play FPSs over the wireless LAN.”

“True. And so I can’t get the latest information. But I do have what I saw while on the transport plane taking me here.” Heivia paused for a second. “Southern Africa. They were doing some dirty work related to water resources using clouds. Any ideas, Quenser?”

The only response from the radio was the sound of a head slamming against the wall.

Part 6

It was time to check what needed to be done.

Quenser leaned against the wall, sipped on his iced coffee, and spoke into the radio.

“We suspect the designer Claire Whist and Unicorn are working together. And it is possible they are linked to the Capitalist Corporations. What do we need to do?”

“Forget all this and head back to our boring duties with a smile?”

“We don’t have time to joke around. We need to move forward.”

“…I was actually being serious.”

“Heivia, you do whatever you can to look into what the Night Edge Platoon…or rather, Unicorn is doing. Both the ones on this island and the ones in southern Africa. I want to know what the entire unit is after.”

“Then you deal with Claire. Climb into bed if you need to, but get as much information as you can. She’s a top designer, so you won’t get many chances to interview her. If we waste this opportunity, we’ll lose any chance of approaching her or getting any information out of her.”

“Of course, Unicorn holds the peace and justice of this island in their hands. They could easily claim we were trying to leak classified information and shoot us. Don’t let them notice you’re looking into this.”

“The same goes for you. Don’t forget that your location makes that technique easiest to use against you.”

After agreeing to contact each other again in an hour, Quenser switched off the radio. He gulped down the rest of the vending machine iced coffee, threw the paper cup in the trash can, and looked over at the wall across from the vending machine.

A whiteboard was hanging on it.

Escalibor, Assault Signal, Slide Lance, Active Shield… The names of several Objects and the battlefields they were in were written in marker. They were likely ones the researchers in the facility had helped design. Quenser recognized one of them.

Baby Magnum.

Southern Africa.

“Dammit.”

Claire Whist had said she had helped design the Baby Magnum. If she was involved with the Capitalist Corporations via the Unicorn force active in southern Africa, the Baby Magnum’s weaknesses could be leaked to the Capitalist Corporations.

And…

Claire had said she was displeased with the Baby Magnum’s results in battles. She had said she would need to use a different design example if it had any further negative effect on her reputation.

“Every new piece of information just makes this seem more and more ominous…”

If he was going to obtain information from Claire, he would first have to return to her room. He could also speak with the residents of the other rooms, but it was obvious what those people would do if some unfamiliar person came knocking at their door inside that top secret facility. They would report him to the Night Edge Platoon and he would be quickly neutralized.

(My best bet is to say I left something in her room.)

With that idea, Quenser knocked on Claire’s door and was invited in with no suspicion. Or at least no visible suspicion.

“What did you forget? Can’t it wait?”

“My cell phone.”

“Oh…that would be bad.”

That was the reaction he had expected.

“The building is made to prevent any signal from getting in or out, but your phone does have a camera and a record function. If it was found in my room afterwards, you could be arrested as a possible spy.”

“It’s red and it’s the type that slides open. It should stand out, so it shouldn’t take long to find.”

“Hm, hm.”

Quenser peered under the bed. As he did, he thought about how to start the conversation. She might put up her guard if he brought up southern Africa right away.

“Come to think of it, don’t you lose your chance to spend all the money you make by living in a place like this?”

“I can order things from the internet, so no. I grow tired of things and throw them out pretty quickly though, so my room doesn’t get too cluttered. Even video games are downloaded these days.”

“Video games?”

Quenser glanced over at the corner of the room. Something that looked like a complexly folded plastic sheet sat there. The device looked like a giant controller modeled after a cockpit for robot games.

“Is that what that’s for?”

“Hm? No, that’s a failed part of an old project. It was supposed to go on a model called the Assault Signal.”

“Is it an Object simulator or something?”

“It’s nothing that amazing. The device allows balance of the Object to be restored via remote control if the Elite passes out inside and it is about to sink into the ocean or anything like that. Even that

requires several dozen to over 100 people. And even then it can't keep up with a high speed battle. It was rejected as it left an opening for hacking, though," explained Claire. "Having some leeway is good. You can be more adventurous when you know there will be a next time even if you fail. And this kind of failed technology that you gain from that leads the way to a stable Object design. It's important to create a cycle. Once the cycle is set up, the returns increase without end, but setting it up can be incredibly difficult. It's the same as how it is more efficient to keep an Object's reactor constantly on rather than switching it on and off."

"I want to begin doing that as soon as possible," replied Quenser honestly.

While looking through the shelves, Claire said, "Also, my goal may actually be gaining the money itself rather than what I can do with it."

"Oh?"

"Even though I live here, my official residence is in Paris. It's pretty big, but I only head back there about twice a year. It feels more like a distant relative's villa. My money and house are the same. Obtaining them is what matters. The amount of money I have and the size of my house add to my social status which increases my power. That especially helps when I have a job that gives me an eccentric image."

Quenser moved aside some magazines on the floor, knocked out the bookmark inside, put the bookmark back in, and otherwise tried to buy as much time as he could while he fully utilized the part of his brain in charge of adlibbing.

"…So what else do you have?"

"Some normal things like nice cars and villas. Oh, and I donate money too. Here's a surprise: 5% of the NGOs in the Legitimacy Kingdom run on the money I make developing weapons!"

Quenser was sure he could more easily find any link to Unicorn or the Capitalist Corporations if he looked through the laptop on the

table, but he could hardly manage that in the current situation.

“Isn’t this sort of like your villa?”

“You could call my villas a social venture. I have villas that I have never even set foot in. I have one in the Amazon jungle, one on the coast of the Mediterranean, one near an Arctic ski resort, and lately I even bought one in the Oceania District. And one in southern Africa, too.”

Quenser could feel his heart leap inside him.

This was his way in.

“Have you ever been to Africa? Do you know what kind of food they have there?”

“Hm? Well, a few times. But I only ate things like hamburgers and tempura. That kind of thing is popular there. The proper home cooking is apparently something like a curry soup filled with spices, but I have yet to run across it. I always let my food cool down before I eat it.”

“I can imagine how that would taste, and I don’t have any desire to track it down.”

“I know. I was hoping for something a little more exciting. Something wild like an entire roast mammoth.”

“There are no mammoths anymore.”

“You’ll understand if you go there. Seeing it on TV just isn’t the same. You’ll feel like you could find something like that there.”

“But isn’t that a battlefield country? Wouldn’t the higher ups in the military get mad if a designer went there for fun? You could be abducted for all the classified information you know.”

“Don’t worry about that. We have some excellent bodyguards for trips like that. If I have the Night Edge Platoon with me, they let me go.”

A gap appeared in the conversation.

Quenser made sure to continue speaking in order to prevent any silence.

“I hear they have penguins in southern Africa.”

“Yes, the African penguins. They’re cute. Even the cities look out for them. They make tunnels especially for the penguins. They’re sometimes used as UGVs for intelligence purposes, though. But,” added Claire Whist, “those tunnels are made only with the roads in mind. When it rains a lot, the tunnels fill with water. Penguins are meant to swim in the ocean, but they do not have gills. They sometimes get lost in the tunnels and drown. It’s most unfortunate.”

The mention of rain caught at Quenser’s mind, but he decided it was too soon to push further.

He continued the conversation while only skimming his topic of interest. He cautiously kept some distance but not too much distance.

“They get lost in the tunnels?”

“Even though the tunnels are just straight paths, it seems they are just so dark and narrow that they can’t tell forward from backward or up from down. They would actually leave the tunnels faster if they merely let the water wash them away.”

“That sounds like a frustrating situation for an animal welfare group.”

“It is. And so the water resource market is viewed as quite the villain.”

Quenser continued to keep some distance but not too much.

He continued on his quest for information while forcing down his worried suspicions that she might actually be inviting him in.

Part 7

Heivia also took action. The actions of the Unicorn group disguised as the Night Edge Platoon on the Cook Addition Islands was one thing, but he had no way of investigating the actions of the main force in Southern Africa just by observing. He had to find a net terminal that could access the military database.

“What a pain in the ass. Why can’t Quenser just look into it using a researcher’s computer?”

“I doubt he’ll have a chance to even touch one of those top secret computers. And the higher ups in the military can tell when a computer inside accesses something outside.”

“Hey, marriage scam artist. Why did you come with me?”

“I’ve awakened to a sense of love and justice.”

“…You’re not part of Unicorn too, are you?”

Heivia and the others had originally been ordered to dispose of the large amount of excess ammunition stored up. None of the soldiers given that task had any motivation and plenty of them had snuck off somewhere else. The fact that they were all beginning to “rot” like that allowed the higher ups to inwardly smile while rebuking them. No one would place any serious blame on Heivia and Genelia for disappearing.

“Hey, where do you think the external lines are? Somewhere in the experiment building?”

“We’d be caught by sensors if we even tried to approach that place. The only facility removed from the classified information on Object design is in the living quarters for the soldiers like us. And that place is basically Night Edge’s fortress.”

“So we have to get the information out of Unicorn’s computers?”

“That would be the fastest way to approach the truth. If they do

have a hotline connected to someone else, they have to have a net terminal hidden from the higher ups."

Heivia wondered what it would look like he and Genelia were doing to someone else. It may have looked like they had grown bored of the never-ending inventory reduction so they were sneaking off to the living quarters to take a nap.

"Hey, I know a quick way to make us look less suspicious. Wrap your arms around my arm."

"…You don't look like you have any money, so no thanks."

"I am one of the Legitimacy Kingdom's foremost nobles, you know!! Even if it is true that every single member of my family is opposed to me being the successor!!"

"Presideeeent, what is the total sum of your asseeeets?"

"Hey, don't cling to me like that! It gives me goose bumps!!"

They walked across a large road-like bridge and arrived at the soldiers' living quarters. It was a large steel piece of land that resembled an offshore drilling platform. And instead of having buildings built on top, the barracks were built hanging down below.

"Night Edge's area is completely cut off from everything else. And the quality of the facilities on their side is better. I guess that's what you get when you're acting as bodyguards for those rich designers. I hear they get to eat dinner in the dining hall rather than just getting ready-made lunchboxes like us."

"I had thought they were just your stereotypical discrimination lovers, but it may have been a way to restrict information. A lot of data gets passed around during mealtimes in the form of chitchat."

"So they wanted to cut off any careless information leaks?"

"I'd say so."

"But then won't it be difficult to get into their area? They probably have tons of cameras set up."

“No, they won’t.”

“?”

“They’re up to no good. Why would they leave any evidence of it?”

The two of them walked by the most obvious entrance to Night Edge’s area and spotted an obvious human guard out of the corner of their eye. It was a masked member of the Night Edge Platoon. They used the human eye so their surveillance would leave behind no records.

“I want to just punch him and head on in.”

“Do you want to fail?”

“Then I guess we have no choice but to find some other way in.”

They checked the ceiling ducts, but they were made of pipes only 10 cm across. They were much too small for a human to pass through.

“We can’t do this like an action movie then.”

“We need to check everything one by one. We might get lucky and find a way in.”

They checked the openings for electric wiring and plumbing, but they were too small and filled with too many twists and turns for a human or UGV to get through.

But…

“Here we go,” said Heivia after opening a steel door. “This place is constructed like an offshore oil platform. Maintenance passageways and stairways are prepared around the large pillars. If the entire core construction is connected, we can use them to move between living areas. And that means we can access Night Edge’s area.”

“Why would that be so open? They went to such effort keeping the ducts and plumbing inaccessible.”

“They were probably made by different contractors. Military facilities are often a complex collection of pieces made by different companies. It’s the same as building a castle. But that means the countermeasures change between contractors. Some areas will seem overly sensitive and other areas will be wide open. The people making it don’t always know how important it is.”

The facility was not the same as a commercial facility. The passageways were narrow and dark, and the wiring and such were sticking out in the open. The walls had no wallpaper covering them. The passageways looked more like something from a military ship than a building.

“So what do we do once we make it into Night Edge’s area?”

“We check the electric meters. This is a horribly hot tropical island. They’re on the winning side of things, so they’ll use the air conditioner 100% of the time instead of opening a window. The rooms the meter isn’t running for are the ones without soldiers in them. We sneak into one of those and search for the terminal.”

“I feel like a sneak thief.”

“That’s sort of what we are.”

They walked down a long passageway, down some stairs, and then grabbed the knob of a steel door. They opened the door a crack and checked on the other side, but they saw no sign of Unicorn.

“Dammit. Where are the electric meters? Do we have to wander around in here when those masked bastards could show up at any moment?”

“Hey, hey. Wouldn’t it be faster to just touch the door and see whether it’s cool or not? That should tell us if the air conditioner is on.”

Someone who ignored good advice to protect his pride would have a short life. And so Heivia did as Genelia had suggested. He placed his palm against one door in the room, being careful not to make any noise. As he repeated the process a few times, he came across a

door that was clearly warmer than the rest.

“This is it.”

“But an empty room will be locked. How do we get in?”

“…We might have to kick down the door.”

“They’d hear that right away. But the deadbolt is made of polycarbonate, isn’t it? That’s usually used to make nonmetallic knives or shields.”

“So?”

“It’s weak to heat. It should melt if we heat it with a fire.” With a metallic clicking noise, Genelia opened the cap of an oil lighter. “Of course, they’ll notice the melted deadbolt later. This is our only chance to investigate in here, so be prepared.”

“Sure thing.”

“And this will create the smell of melted plastic. That could draw their attention. We need to be careful.”

“You sure know a lot about this.”

“I exchanged information with other criminals before I was caught. And I learned some things at bars too. Unfortunately, just hearing about it wasn’t enough to pick up some trickier skills like picking locks.”

It took about 30 seconds to unlock the door.

It did indeed create a bit of an unpleasant odor. The smell made them feel uneasy, but fortunately Unicorn showed no sign of coming in from the other rooms.

“It’s open.”

“Sorry about the intrusion,” said Heivia jokingly as he turned the doorknob and slowly opened the door.

He peered in through the crack.

In the next instant, two arms reached out from the room and wrapped around Heivia's neck.

Someone was inside.

A dull pain spread from Heivia's neck and assaulted his entire body as he came to a quick decision. Instead of trying to remove the arms, he used his shoulder to tackle the door and the person inside.

The sudden impact sent the attacker rolling back into the room. Heivia charged in and straddled the person.

To Genelia, he said, "Shut the door. Damn this economical bastard! I can't believe one of them likes to stew in his own sweat!!"

Heivia grabbed the collapsed masked man by the collar to constrict his carotid arteries which quickly knocked him unconscious. Heivia lightly lifted up the limp soldier's black mask to check his neck.

Heivia grimaced when he spotted what he had expected to find.

"Scars from stiches circling around the neck. He's from Unicorn too."

Heivia bound the soldier's arms and legs with the cable to an electric hot water dispenser, stuffed his mask in his mouth to keep him from speaking, and tossed him in the bathroom.

"Did you kill him?" asked Genelia.

"If I had, I wouldn't have gone to all that trouble. …God dammit. I have nothing against bondage, but why does it have to be with a guy?" spat out Heivia as he looked around the room.

It looked like a simple business hotel room. It was mostly tidy, but a few bags had been left in one corner.

Heivia checked inside and found a high speed modem. He also found a parabolic antenna about 30 cm across. It seemed they had been contacting someone outside the base via a communications

satellite.

“There’s a metal fixture on the window’s handrail. It’s probably what they attach the antenna to.”

“This building hangs down from the offshore oil platform. I guess they can receive the signal down here.”

They could not find the actual computer used, but they found a small device when they checked what the man in the bathroom had on him.

“We can do this.”

“What’s the password?”

“That important information was carelessly left on a memo in one of the bags.”

“…Sigh. This must have been supplied to him, so he hasn’t had time to memorize the password.”

They used the small device to access the network.

It connected to the information network used exclusively by the Night Edge Platoon…or rather, Unicorn.

“They were originally a unit that carried out missions undercover. It isn’t surprising they would have a network set up that doesn’t use the official military format.”

“What have you found? Anything on their activity in southern Africa?”

“Wait, here it is. I have it. Something related to the water resource business using clouds in southern Africa.”

That was when they heard several sets of footsteps on the other side of the door. They were not simply heading down the passageway. They were clearly gathering around the door.

They must have noticed something was happening.

“Not good… Genelia, move all that data over to your device!”

“How did they notice us? The man in the bathroom is bound and gagged, right!?”

“He may have only pretended to be taken out and actually woke up pretty quickly.” Heivia approached the window and checked to see if it could be used to escape. “If he kicked at the wall with his bound feet, he could send a message using Morse code. Maybe I should have just killed him.”

“The data transfer is complete!”

“Okay, c’mere. This way!”

Just as Heivia and Genelia leaned out the window, the door to the room was violently kicked down and a stun grenade was tossed in.

Part 8

At the promised time, Quenser took his cell phone out of his pocket and pretended to pick it up off the floor. He then parted ways with Claire Whist.

That was the limit.

He could no longer head back to her room saying he had lost something.

He headed for the same corner of the building as before and tried to contact Heivia via radio.

“Heivia, Heivia?”

He received no response.

He had no idea if the other boy was receiving the signal.

He was worried, but he had no way to relieve those worries. He had no choice but to simply carry out his job.

“I don’t know if you can hear me, but I’m going to tell you anyway. The Night Edge Platoon was not brought here to protect the Cook Addition Islands. It seems Claire herself used her authority around the world to have them brought in as her personal bodyguards. In other words, they are her private army. The odds are good she is using them to carry out her dirty work.”

He still received no response.

Quenser clicked his tongue at the level of static he could hear, but continued nevertheless.

“What I learned from talking with her is that there is another large market in southern Africa in addition to the water resource business using clouds. Megasolar power generation. They fill dry land that cannot grow crops with a bunch of solar panels. They make an electricity plantation.”

No matter what he said, he received no response.

That simple truth threatened to crush Quenser's heart.

"Claire was surprisingly careful about this. When I poked at it, she would immediately change the subject. It is true the megasolar power generation business is at odds with the water resource business since the former does not want it to rain and the latter wants it to rain, but her reaction still stood out to me. A large key to the side business is probably hidden there."

That was when he heard a loud noise.

It did not come from the radio.

The thick gate leading into the building had opened. Quenser looked over because he thought some researchers were going in or out, but he immediately hid behind a pile of railroad magazines when he saw who it was.

He saw black masks and carbines.

They were members of the Night Edge Platoon…or rather, Unicorn.

A girl who must have been one of the eccentrics (aka genius designers) exchanged a few words with the masked men as she jogged down a long passageway.

(Did they pick up my radio signal? No, they probably just thought I was taking too long to come out.)

Either way, he could not let them find him. In the worst case, he would be shot in the name of preventing the leakage of classified information. They could just add any charges they needed after the fact.

"…This isn't good. There are four of them," he spat out.

Before he entered the building, his bombs and other weapons had been confiscated. And more importantly, Quenser would be crushed in a pure firefight even if he was equipped the same as them. Unlike Heivia, he had not undergone training in close quarters combat or

how to handle firearms.

There was a blatant difference between a student and a soldier.

He had no chance of winning in a straight fight.

But…

“You could say the same thing about Objects,” muttered Quenser as he slipped out from behind the pile of railroad magazines and down a different passageway.

He first had to search for something he could use as a weapon among the things the genius girls (and women) had left scattered through the passageways.

“Compared to those monsters, four hysteric bastards should be easy.”

Part 9

A stun grenade was a nonlethal weapon that used intense light and sound to rob the enemy of their senses and mobility. It incapacitated them for a few seconds to a few dozen seconds. Normally, the enemy would be finished off using a gun in that time.

Heivia and Genelia had already leaned their bodies out the window by the time it went off.

That allowed them to avoid a direct hit, but a slight white afterimage was still burned into their eyes. But they did not have time to rub at their eyes. Fortunately, a scaffold-like space stretched out beyond the window and they used it to flee.

“This is bad. This is bad, this is bad, this is bad!!”

“Is there a corner anywhere around here!? If we just head straight, we’ll be shot in the back!!”

There was a corner not far away.

But before they could reach it, a masked Unicorn member stuck his upper body out the window behind them. He was aiming his carbine in their direction.

Heivia flicked off the safety on his assault rifle and brought his index finger to the trigger.

He fired a short burst of three shots.

And afterward, Heivia wanted to hold his head in his hands.

“I’ve finally done it! I fired on an ally!!”

“What are you talking about? You already strangled one of them. If we can’t bring their wrongdoing to light, you’ll definitely be headed to court martial.”

It seemed the man had flinched back so he had not been hit. After

Heivia and Genelia made it around the corner, they heard return gunfire.

They continued running and began climbing up a staircase for workers that was more or less a ladder built diagonally. As he climbed, Heivia checked his equipment.

“I have three magazines and two grenades.”

“Aren’t those the smoke grenades from inventory?”

“This stuff is completely useless!”

“That would be why so much was left for us to use up.”

Sporadic gunfire came after Heivia and Genelia, but either the enemy’s foothold was not sturdy or they were afraid of the strong gusts of wind signaling a storm was approaching because their aim was not settled. Heivia and Genelia continued up and up.

“Did you find anything in the data?”

“The water resource business using clouds and the megasolar power generation business are in competition.”

“Yeah, both of those deal with the weather. If it doesn’t rain, the water resources people are in trouble, but if the sky is covered in clouds, the megasolar people are in trouble. So which one is Claire involved with?”

“Officially, she works with the water resource business. In other words, the people who create clouds. But…”

“But?”

“It seems there is someone who is investing in both of them. Their name wasn’t listed, though.”

“But if one succeeds, the other one fails, right?”

“There is no guarantee the money actually belongs to the person.” Genelia lightly licked her lips and continued. “In other words,

southern Africa is a financial black hole. No matter which one you invest in, you will lose money in the end.

It may look like there are times when you make money, but the more money you spend, the more it sucks out of you. But the ones paying will lose their cool and not realize what is going on until they have lost a huge sum of money. It's the same thing that happens in corrupt casinos. Now, a question: How much damage could one do by convincing individuals and groups you want to weaken to buy into this financial black hole?"

"…So the problem isn't Africa?" Heivia could feel an unpleasant sweat appearing on his body. "Claire lures influential people and corporations within the Legitimacy Kingdom into that financial black hole and the continued losses weaken them. It all plays right into the hands of the Capitalist Corporations."

Modern wars were carried out with Objects. And so no one set out to raze a world power's capital or to eradicate an opposing race of people.

Wars cost money.

By robbing an enemy nation of their money, they could be driven into a state where they were unable to wage war. If that was Claire's goal with the financial black hole, her betrayal would do damage to the entirety of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

And in the long run, it could even do more serious damage than any clash between Objects.

"How can this be? This is a completely different form of war."

"If Claire and Unicorn have become pawns of the Capitalist Corporations, we absolutely must make sure this information gets out. It could act as a splash of icy water for the clients who have lost their cool." Perhaps because this could be classified as a scam involving huge amounts of money, Genelia seemed somehow excited about it. "So what do we do? No matter where we run, the Night Edge Platoon controls the peace and justice of the Cook Addition Islands."

“The same cannot be said for the Objects protecting the islands. We need to find some way to get this information to them. Dammit. Will our radios be enough? We should have brought that satellite antenna with us when we fled.”

That was when they heard the roar of something beating against the air.

Something was approaching from one of the other islands. What they saw flying through the sky looked like a compromise between an airplane and a helicopter. It was a propeller-driven craft called a tiltrotor. The angle of the propellers attached to the wings could be altered by 90 degrees to provide vertical or horizontal thrust.

To put it simply, it was a medium-sized aircraft that could take off like a helicopter so it did not need a runway.

“That’s a transport plane…right? Is it going to drop down some soldiers?”

“No…This is bad,” groaned Heivia.

He had noticed the several gun barrels sticking out from the left side of the tiltrotor’s body.

“It’s a gunship!! It’s a fortress of the sky that uses its large size to store tons of shells. I think that’s a 150mm artillery gun, a 50mm howitzer, and a 30mm Gatling gun sticking out there. No matter which one it fires, we’ll be blown to pieces! Even if we hid under a tank, it would just tear the tank apart!!”

The main advantage of a gunship was its ability to continuously fire down on an enemy from the sky. The many shells in the large-capacity gunship would be fired like crazy while it flew in a large circle with the target in the center. By switching between the armaments roughly meant for anti-building, anti-tank, and anti-personnel, it could destroy anything inside its circle so the target had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. That was the kind of weapon it was.

“Wh-what if we flee downwards!? The thick layers of the building

might protect us!”

“That’s what they want. They’re cutting off our escape from above so the soldiers coming up from below can capture us. No matter where we run, we’ll only find a dead end!”

“Then what do we do!? There’s no way we can shoot down that mid-sized aircraft with our rifles!”

“C’mere! I’ll do something about it!!”

Since it was trying to fly in a large circle, the gunship did not head directly toward Heivia and Genelia. It smoothly flew into position like a record needle.

It would soon begin.

The endless circular flight and rain of bullets powerful enough to blow away a storm would begin.

Part 10

Trying to oppose professional soldiers using contraptions created out of things like metal pipes and old magazines was something that only worked in action movies. When you were already weaker than the enemy in skill and physical strength, you had no chance of winning if your equipment was also worse.

What did a combat amateur like Quenser need to defeat that group of four Night Edge members?

He needed enough firepower to overcome individual skill.

(This building's layout is too simple to play hide and seek in. They'll find me before long if I just keep running.)

And so Quenser quickly gave up on trying to advance quietly. The doors had no labels, but he found a room around which the carpet and wallpaper smelled of mechanical oil, kicked open the door, and entered.

"How nostalgic. It reminds me of my school's workshop."

A lathe, an electric furnace, a work table, and a water tank for plating. The room was filled with tools for various types of metalwork. One of them was a device that used the explosive power of gunpowder to mold metal. Such devices could be found in any facility with a certain level of funding.

Gunpowder.

That was Quenser's field of expertise.

"…Oh, dear. This is too sensitive. This kind will detonate just from static electricity," muttered Quenser while he pulled out a container filled with pellets of gunpowder like it was fish food. He put it back in the bag and crushed it down to a complete powder while dividing it into a few smaller packages.

He tapped on the room's wall and heard a light sound. The sound

was as light as the wall behind the vending machine where the material to cut off electromagnetic signals had been removed. As he had expected, the inner walls were not very strong.

“The enemy will be coming through the door. So they should grow a bit frantic if I create a different route.”

The desk with the rather heavy lathe on it had small wheels on the legs. That allowed him to roll it over to the door. It was a simple method of protecting him from the bullets. He also set up some explosives on either side of the door. In his heart, he swore to blow away anyone who tried the cliché of “peering through the door while pressing up against the wall next to it”.

“Now then. I’m going to assume they’ll have expected all of this.”

He was up against four enemies.

One of them would break in through the main entrance. The other three would take up position in the three rooms adjacent to this one to truly surround him. Even if he tried to blow away one of the walls with explosives to secure an escape route, he would find a soldier waiting for him.

The shockwave created when he destroyed the wall or door would make the enemy falter, but an enemy that was expecting it could put together a countermeasure.

Quenser thought while he once more cautiously tapped on the wall to locate the pillars.

To overcome his enemy, he would need yet another plan.

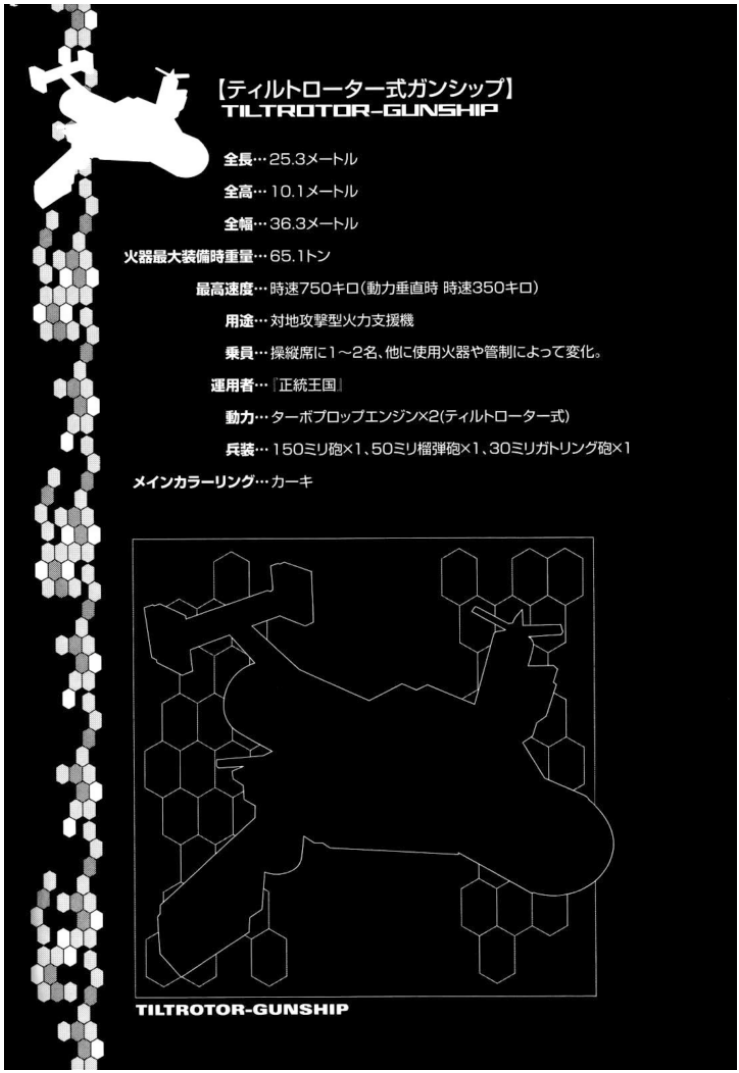
Part 11

The tiltrotor gunship.

Up until the introduction of Objects, that weapon was close to holding the primary role on the battlefield. Its overwhelming loading capacity gave it tremendous firepower and its ability to take off without a runway made it very convenient. Another factor that moved it closer to holding the primary role was the introduction of a variety that was filled with nothing but cartridge-style laser weapon units in place of the guns.

That allowed it to overcome the previous rule stating that a slow aircraft was powerless on a battlefield without air superiority already achieved. The gunship had become a fortress of the sky that could intercept fighters and even cruise and ballistic missiles. The appearance of such a fortress allowed a combination of the normal model and the laser model to rip through both the air and the land and one-sidedly conquer a battlefield.

But the introduction of laser weapons also strangled the gunship itself. Based on its use in gunships, armies began introducing laser weapons for air-to-air use, surface-to-air use, and for missile defense. Even the quickly moving air superiority fighters could not evade those laser weapons, so there was no hope for the gunships themselves to evade them. And once tons of anti-air lasers were equipped on the Objects that could not be stopped no matter what, the tiltrotor gunships had lost their spot in the primary role.



And now one of those weapons that had created an era and greatly affected the flow of history was being used against two flesh-and-blood soldiers.

To be blunt, there was no hope for them.

The pilot used the gunship's internal communications to speak with his comrades.

“The anti-personnel sensors are working great. I’m gonna make a nice circle around that center point. Let’s show them this old thing still works.”

“Pteranodon really is the perfect nickname for this old fossil. And it’s a pretty cool name, too,” replied one of his comrades.

“Fossil? This is the latest model,” said another one. “Some officer is probably still having them developed for nostalgic purposes. It’s obviously not for any practical reason.”

“Weapons control: standby. Auto-loading: standby. Chemical cooling: standby. All green. We begin in 10 seconds. Everyone make sure you have your noise canceller on!” said a third comrade.

The pilot’s job was to continually fly in a large circle around the center point seen on the anti-personnel sensors. Even a trainee could fly that cruel merry-go-round. Since it was possible the target would use a shoulder-fired missile or something similar, he kept his fingers on the chaff and flare buttons just in case. He doubted he would really need them though.

(This is an easy job.)

But he suddenly noticed something while waiting for the countdown to finish.

“Wait. Do not fire! I repeat, do not fire!!” he shouted.

“Why not!?”

“I still have them in my sights. I can fire at any time.”

“The target is fleeing to the bridge between islands,” explained the pilot over the internal communications while a cold sweat covered his brow. “That bridge doesn’t just allow transportation. It is the cornerstone of the plumbing, electric, and communications infrastructures. It would be easy to blow the target away, but we would be cutting our own lifeline at the same time. All of our weapons are too powerful!!”

Heivia and Genelia were not on the top road part of the bridge.

They were down below. A normal bridge would have had a complex steel framework strengthening it, but the bridges on the Cook Addition Islands had pipes, power cables, and communications lines passing through.

“This is just a cheap trick. It won’t be enough to survive.”

“True. Dammit, they’re jamming us so our communications can’t reach the Objects. We have to do something about that gunship either way.”

“You mean shoot it down?” Genelia frowned. “That’s a tiltrotor. A tiltrotor! This isn’t some forcibly altered mid-sized transport plane with no flexibility. It can stop in midair like a helicopter and it can rise and descend however it likes. Hiding under the bridge just means it has to descend to an altitude low enough to peek under and shoot us.”

“But they can’t use the ridiculously huge guns installed on that gunship. Even the smallest Gatling gun would crush their lifeline.”

“They don’t have to use them. The tiltrotor was originally used as a transport plane. They can open up the back cargo door and target us with a sniper rifle. We’re still in trouble!”

“That’s what I’m waiting for, baby.” Heivia removed the grenade launcher from the bottom of his assault rifle. He handed the rifle to Genelia. “You handle this. Fire like crazy at the tiltrotor’s engine. You probably won’t hit much and it probably won’t set fire to the engine even if you do, but it should make the pilot panic. If he flies erratically, it will shake the people aboard and lower their accuracy considerably.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll use this.”

Heivia lightly waved the 40mm grenade launcher he had removed from the bottom of the assault rifle’s barrel. By extending a few attached parts, he gave it a grip and stock. Its silhouette changed from “tube” to “gun”.

Genelia blinked several times.

“What range does an underbarrel grenade launcher have?”

“Two to three hundred meters.”

“But they can aim from 1000 meters away!”

“While peering through a scope from inside a tiltrotor that’s moving all over the place? They won’t be able to snipe with that kind of theoretical value. No matter how hard they try, 700 meters will be their limit. If they want to be sure, they’ll get as close as 500 meters.”

“Are you so stupid you can’t do simple subtraction?”

“I can make up for that with some addition.”

Heivia spun a ring-shaped part on the side of the grenade launcher and attached an additional part to the bottom of the shell that was about the size of a can of coffee.

“What are you doing?”

“Supercharging it. This increases the gunpowder used to fire it. This is often used to increase the firing range of a mortar. It isn’t popular when used with handheld grenade launchers though. There were reports of the barrel being unable to withstand the increased pressure and gaining small cracks after firing a few times.”

“Why were we issued something that dangerous?”

“There are still a ton in stock *because* they’re so dangerous,” said Heivia as if singing while he peered down the grenade launcher’s sight.

The sensors were all on the rifle, so he had to aim with the naked eye for once.

“More importantly, you need to get firing, too. Target the gunship’s wings and engine. It’s descended and is about to peer in under the bridge. If you don’t frighten the pilot and get him to shake the gunship, the snipers will fire.”

“I’m doing it. I’m doing it. But isn’t that a smoke grenade? Do you really think we can shoot down a gunship that was made to be fired on from below? The interior is probably filled with thick plates,” asked Genelia while firing the assault rifle on full auto for so long it

seemed obvious she was not actually trying to fire accurately.

Heivia waited for the perfect timing with a thin smile on his lips.

“The tiltrotor is only meant to fly 3000 meters up, so unlike a transport plane meant to fly at high altitude, it has no ability to regulate its internal air pressure. In other words, there is no wall dividing the cargo area and the cockpit. That means the smoke will fill the cockpit as long as I can fire it in through the cargo door. Also, the tiltrotor was always less stable than a helicopter. It’ll be done for in a few seconds if the pilot is blinded this close to the ocean surface,” he said while holding a finger against the trigger. “After coming all this way for a tropical vacation, they need to go swimming in the ocean at least once.”

A 300 euro riot suppression round brought a 2 million euro cutting-edge craft crashing into the ocean surface.

With the jamming gone, Heivia and Genelia now had a chance to inform the Objects on the ocean of the truth.

Part 12

Even a child who kept up to date with the news sites that had replaced newspapers would know Quenser Barbotage was proficient with explosives. After all, he had been awarded for blowing up Objects with them. It was perfect for a quick topic to discuss at mealtime.

And that was why the masked men from the Night Edge Platoon grimaced slightly when they realized Quenser had kicked open the door to the workshop and holed himself up inside. They knew about the gunpowder used for metalworking. And Quenser Barbotage was known for doing his own thing no matter what he was told.

“He’s probably going to blow away one of the walls when we try to break in through the door. Ignore the passageways. Assume he can pass through the walls.”

And then something exploded.

The four walls of the workshop were blown away simultaneously.

But something they had not expected also happened.

The workshop’s ceiling must not have been able to support the load without the walls because it collapsed.

“…What? Did he accidentally kill himself? …I guess he is just an amateur.”

Failures often appeared in the process of making a novel idea a reality. But when those ideas did occasionally succeed, they could slip past the standard theories of the experts and cause unexpected damage.

That was the truth of how the boy had managed to defeat those Objects in the past.

“Tch. Well, that was a dud.”

The four Night Edge members stepped past the crumbled walls and into the workroom…or technically, its remains. The collapse of the ceiling made it impossible to tell what kind of equipment had been inside or even what color the floor had been.

“Digging him up is going to be a pain.”

“Can’t we leave that to the trash outside?”

“This facility itself is considered classified, so we can’t let them in.”

“…….”

The fourth voice was not heard.

It seemed he actually had said something, but his voice did not reach any of the others’ ears.

The reason for this was simple.

The second wave of explosives Quenser had set up in the room had detonated.

The shockwave swept out in every direction. Regardless of how trained the Night Edge members' bodies were, they were knocked out by the blast. Just as even the strongest person would die if thrown into a fire or dragged deep underwater, the shock did enough damage to cross the line between pro and amateur and overcome the basic limits of the human body.

Incidentally, Quenser was below the rubble.

He had set the first wave of explosives after checking where the pillars were. The explosives had been positioned so the ceiling would collapse with an empty space in the spot Quenser was curled up within.

And the explosions Quenser was causing were the type to create only a shockwave. They created no flames, shrapnel, or other dangerous side effects. The wall of sound that knocked out his enemies was not powerful enough to pierce through the shelter of rubble covering him.

“You should thank me. You don’t often get taken out by a nonlethal explosion. More often, you just get shot by a normal bullet.”

Quenser picked up a carbine from one of the unconscious masked men and swiped his handheld device. The Night Edge Platoon had a few dozen men spread across the Cook Additions Islands. Reinforcements would be immediately sent out once the rest realized what had happened here.

“That means I need to finish this before a large-scale battle begins. That laptop’s communications are monitored by higher ups in the military. If I send out an SOS over that line, it will naturally reach them.”

“That is a dangerous plan. And it isn’t necessary,” said a sudden female voice.

Quenser held up the carbine and turned around to find the designer Claire Whist lightly putting up her hands while wearing her lab coat and bikini. She was surprisingly close by. She was close enough to charge at him if he looked away even for a second.

She grinned and said, “Do you actually understand the situation here?”

“A wall has been altered to allow communications outside the building without the higher ups monitoring it. You are suspected to have a connection with the Capitalist Corporations. There is competition between the water resource business and megasolar business in southern Africa. Communications from Heivia have stopped. …And on top of it all, you want to get rid of the Baby Magnum which is currently in southern Africa.”

“The evidence you need to confirm your suspicions is on that handheld device. Why don’t you check it?”

“I’m not stupid enough to take my eyes off you and give you a chance to attack.”

“I won’t do anything like that. You took them out with a shockwave, remember? You should probably at least check to make

sure it turns on and wasn't broken."

"That's a good-…bh!?"

Just as Quenser used his thumb to try to turn on the device, Claire sent a kick in his direction. Quenser frantically tried to move out of the way, but a stabbing pain ran through his entire body before he could. Strength left his legs and he collapsed to the ground.

"A…stun gun!?"

"I showed it to you when we first met, didn't I?"

Quenser used his arms that he could still just barely move to keep himself from completely collapsing, but Claire calmly sat on his back. The boy in a crawling pose became her chair.

Claire pressed the electrodes of the stun gun against the back of his head and picked up the handheld device.

"Stay still."

“If you use the stun gun now, the current will flow into your ass too…”

“But it will be worse for you. What do you think will happen if 30 thousand volts are sent into your head? The user’s manual listed it as the worst place to use it after the heart.”

With that simple comment, Claire folded her legs and operated the handheld device with one hand.

“Are you going to erase the evidence?”

“No. This is as good a time as any, so I’ll begin here.”

“Begin what?”

“Giving some answers. It seems things have gotten noisy outside, and this will get troublesome if the Objects’ maintenance units come to investigate the island. The Night Edge Platoon…that is, Unicorn won’t be enough to stop them. And so I would like to finish this before that happens. Got it?”

Claire Whist used one of the handheld device’s apps to begin a conversation. It seemed the signal was able to leave the building from where they were because Quenser had blown a hole in the ceiling. The person on the other end seemed to be a high official of the military.

But was he from the Legitimacy Kingdom military?

Or the Capitalist Corporations military?

“Brigadier general, I was thinking about pulling the trigger in southern Africa,” said Claire.

“This is a video chat, so I am receiving video of you. That is quite an…odd situation.”

“I’ve recently taken a liking to this kind of thing. It’s not like I have much else to do here,” said Claire in a casual tone.

The man she had referred to as brigadier general cut straight to the main topic.

“If you say the timing is right, I will go along with it, but isn’t this a little early to pull the trigger in southern Africa?”

“The peak value is only theoretical. Aiming for it in reality will actually hurt us.”

Claire then tapped on Quenser’s head with the stun gun’s electrodes.

Once she had his attention, she spoke.

Spoke to Quenser, not the handheld device.

“This is what is really going on in southern Africa. The water resource business using clouds and the megasolar power generation business are in conflict. That conflict is used to create a financial black hole. We lure influential people within the Legitimacy Kingdom to have us invest their money in this black hole and put them deeply into debt.”

“Wait a second. Why are you telling him this?” asked the man.

“You may think I have a connection with the Capitalist Corporations, but you are wrong about that. There are people within the Legitimacy Kingdom itself who wish to weaken other influential members of the Legitimacy Kingdom. Political conflict, infighting…there are plenty of reasons for it.”

“Shut your mouth!! Do you have any idea how valuable that information is!?” shouted the man Claire had called a brigadier general, but she merely grinned and continued speaking.

At this stage, it did not matter to her what anyone thought. Her body language made that clear.

“But certain events are needed to keep a financial black hole causing losses indefinitely. If it stays the same, people grow tired of it. The fire burning in their minds cools off. If that happens, the investors realize it is a dangerous deal. And so we need to arrange periodic events to ensure that does not happen. And one of those will be the Object you know being deployed to southern Africa.”

“The Baby Magnum?”

“If it clashes with the Capitalist Corporations and loses spectacularly, the situation there will change greatly. The water resource business is supported by the Legitimacy Kingdom and the megasolar business is supported by the Capitalist Corporations. The investors’ money will all go into megasolar. And the people of the Legitimacy Kingdom won’t even know it because we are handling

the investments. But it will not be enough to destroy the financial black hole. The more money they pump in, the greater the losses expand. My job," whispered Claire Whist while removing the stun gun from Quenser's head, "is to uncover the idiots who are trying to wear down the Legitimacy Kingdom's own national power over internal conflicts when we are in the middle of a worldwide war. That is why I used Unicorn to set up an independent network that slips past the higher ups. I can't have the people I'm supposed to trap catching on to what we're doing."

"…!!"

Quenser heard a clicking noise.

The man Claire had referred to as a brigadier general had ended the connection.

But Claire showed no sign of worry.

"It's too late," she said. "Before he can even chug some whisky and shoot himself with his handgun, the Black Uniforms charged with barrier duty will capture him."

"…This was all a sting?"

"It just turned out that way this time. Sometimes I am the one doing the underhanded things. But that is why I'm not all that mad about you interfering in all this. I'm not some honor student that gets a stomachache when things don't go exactly according to plan. When you accept any means necessary, war can get even more twisted than this. In fact, when I think about how the situation must have looked to you, you made a refreshingly wonderful decision."

War.

That was what Claire Whist had called it.

Quenser very rarely had a chance to hold a gun, but that woman would have had even fewer chances. It was quite likely she had never once fired one from the day she was born.

And yet…

“You need to take this more seriously, Quenser. This is a war waged above your level. The wars using Objects cost a lot of money. And even more is gained from them. If that was not the case, no one would keep these troublesome wars going. This creates a lot of plans to profit from it all as well as quite a few conflicts.”

“What about the financial black hole? Aren’t those influential people from the Legitimacy Kingdom still pouring tons of money into it!?”

“It is just a dummy market made to look like a financial black hole,” replied Claire smoothly. “The issue with southern Africa is that the water resource business using clouds and the megasolar business using sunlight are in competition due to the weather. Time after time, one succeeds and the other fails. In a seesaw market, the losses outweigh the gains no matter which one you invest in. That is why only the debt increases. That is what forms the financial black hole.”

“And…?”

“Oh? Didn’t you know? We have completed a system to somewhat freely create clouds and make it rain.” Claire sounded like she was enjoying herself. “That just means we have to create multiple facilities. Area A is equipped with water resource pools and megasolar panels and area B is also equipped with water resource pools and megasolar panels. Afterwards, we just make it rain alternatively on area A and area B. While it rains on area A, it is sunny in area B. Area B can generate power and have water piped in. When it rains in area B, the opposite is done. That way you can perpetually supply both water and electricity. The two businesses are no longer in competition and everyone can get along and make money. Do you get it now?”

“Would that really work so well?” asked Quenser. “Southern Africa is a battlefield. Building pipelines across territories belonging to different world powers would create friction. And even if it does not cross any borders, an enemy unit could attack and destroy it. It just wouldn’t work.”

“And that line of reasoning is why that brigadier general believed

southern Africa really was a financial black hole." Claire still did not seem worried. "I bought up all the stock of a construction company that worked at being charitable rather than on widespread advertising. They are well known and influential throughout different territories all across southern Africa. I can use them to expedite negotiations between different territories and I have Unicorn attack those that still refuse to cooperate. That is how I am building up the foundation. The pipeline will not be destroyed. … And people tend to be better off with stable infrastructure."

"…"

Claire had no intention of betraying the Legitimacy Kingdom.

She had been using Unicorn to take action without the traitors higher up in the military noticing.

In fact, she had actually been protecting the Baby Magnum from being used in the financial black hole project.

But…

Just as Quenser breathed a sigh of relief, Claire Whist lifted herself up a bit and then sat back down to put more weight on his back.

"Gyahh!?'

"And now it is time for you to give me an answer. …This workshop has been completely destroyed. Four members of Unicorn have been splendidly knocked out. And from what I have heard over the communications lines, a gunship made from a modified tiltrotor has been brought down into the ocean outside. How do you plan to logically explain this situation?"

Quenser's mouth flapped open and closed, but no words came out.

Claire folded her legs and smiled as she looked down at him.

"If you can't come up with anything, you will have to be sent away again. But I can't think of anywhere worse than here."

Part 13

And so they set a new record.

Quenser and Heivia were the first soldiers to ever be sent elsewhere after only two or three days since they were sent to the “gentle prison” of the Cook Addition Islands.

As Claire Whist stood in the corner with the vending machine, she watched the transport plane they were onboard in a window on her laptop. As she did, she received a transmission.

It was from a Unicorn member disguised as a Night Edge member.

“We could have falsified the records. Since it took place in the workshop, we could have said the gunpowder exploded due to static electricity. And once that was overlooked, couldn’t we have worked him into our plans?”

“The tiltrotor would have been hard to explain away. And I get the feeling they wouldn’t be as effective without being together.”

“Even so, the mere fact that he had destroyed Objects as a flesh-and-blood soldier is a pretty big deal. It could even help in that ‘higher war’ you like to talk about.”

“No, no.” Claire seemed to be enjoying herself, but she still rejected the idea. “He is the type to blow everything away and flee if he is surrounded on all four sides. It doesn’t matter how many obstacles are in his way. So it is best to let him do his thing at a distance than to have him at your fingertips. That means there is no need to arrange for that transport plane to be shot down while making it look like it was a shoulder-fired missile fired by independent guerillas on a solitary Pacific island. He would just get in the way.”

“…”

“Don’t glare at me like that. Uncertain factors are profitable. But only when they are thrown into situations that have nothing to do

with you. Let's keep an eye on them like we are watching a fire on the opposite river bank. They are like a jack-in-the-box that overturns stagnation. It feels like a waste to leave it unopened, but I would rather not open it myself. Do you know what I mean?"

Even then, many conspiracies were underway in the world powers of the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization. Wars were being started over Objects clashing for the gain of entire organizations or of individuals.

A stable foundation prompted wealth to gather and that gathering invited stagnation and decay.

It was the standard course.

And even when you knew it was coming, it was surprisingly difficult to break free.

"Did you hear the higher ups have decided on the official date for a Royal Duel?" said Claire Whist while relaxing her shoulders.

However, the aura put off by the Night Edge member changed slightly.

"It's a battle between Objects that will decide who gets the crown of the Volga District. How ridiculous. Do the kings way, way, way above all of us not realize how much tax money and human lives are lost in all this?"

"Are you suggesting those two will disrupt that elegant duel?"

"I have no proof of it. Maybe I just want to see those arrogant royals panicking."

Claire's tone was completely casual even though her comment could be considered lese-majesty even if it was a joke.

"He is not suited to being a designer," whispered Claire as she closed her laptop, leaned against the wall, and looked up at the ceiling. "If he started putting together an Object with those dangerous ideas of his, he would skip past the third generation and

straight to something like the seventh generation."

Chapter 2: The Team that Carries Out Dirty Jobs More Painful than Hell > > Transportation Battle in the Athabasca District

Part 1

In the northern portion of the North American continent was a freezing land where everything from the ground underfoot to the sky above was covered by a white blizzard. A convoy of 5 large military trucks drove amid all the white. Eight-wheeled armored vehicles with tank-like turrets defended the convoy at the front and back.

Something was obviously different about the convoy.

Quenser and Heivia had been thrown into the canopied back of one of those military trucks. Twenty to thirty other soldiers were crammed in along with them. It seemed all of the trucks were in a similar state.

Heivia was facing the similarly aged soldier who had happened to sit next to him.

“Really, I’m not lying! Her tits are like ‘Baboom’! ‘Baboom’!! I know it’s a weird sound effect to use. Normally, it would be something like ‘boing’, but only ‘baboom’ does our commander’s justice.”

“I-I see. But I’m still not quite sure how to picture that…”

“If you saw them, you’d get it right away. Is there a picture of her on the military network? Even just a bust shot would be enough for you to see what a presence they have.”

It seemed the only redeeming feature of the young male soldier Heivia was speaking to was that he had a chef’s license.

Quenser decided to help him out by saying, “How can you talk so much when it’s so cold we can see our breath?”

“I feel like I’ll freeze to death if I don’t keep talking. I want a fireplace, a bed, and a beautiful woman.”

“That’s what you would want no matter where you are.”

“You’ve got that right,” said Heivia in annoyance. “All we’ve been doing here is digging shells out of the snow and freezing the fuse with liquid nitrogen before pulling them out. And those old style weapons wouldn’t be used by a proper military with Objects. It must be local guerillas. I can’t stand this. They’re the ones that scattered these duds everywhere, so why can’t they clean them up?”

They then heard a metallic clanging noise.

They all looked in the direction of the sound and saw the woman who acted as their leader lightly beating her fist against the floor of the truck bed.

“Attention,” she said. She had a headset on so her voice could reach the other trucks. “We gathered you disposable supplies from different parts of the world and are going to put you to work on plenty of dishonorable missions. Our unit has no official designation. After all, it would be a problem if we actually existed. If we die, we will not be counted in the international lists of war dead, so be careful. But it would be inconvenient to contact us without a name, so we do have an unofficial one. The Background Unit. We melt into the background. We never step forward. You should make your motto ‘the nail that sticks out gets hammered down’.”

“Sure thing,” said Heivia with a grin. Apparently nothing else mattered for him as long as she had a pretty face and large breasts. “What’s our job this time? Eliminating the other party in a high official’s affair?”

“An excellent question, Private Heivia Winchell. About half of the unit does not know how things work in Background since half the unit was blown away the other day and had to be replaced. I will now explain what Operation Christmas Boot is before we begin. It all began with an obsolete stealth bomber,” said the woman simply. “That said, it was not being used to turn some city into empty land. Its mission was to transport a secret material. But its identification signal was switched off to allow absolute secrecy and that resulted in it being shot down by a fellow Legitimacy Kingdom surface-to-air missile. It performed an emergency landing deep in these white mountains.”

“What idiots,” muttered Quenser.

The woman ignored him and continued, “Someone must recover this secret material. That is why we were deployed. The retrieval of unexploded ordnance was a decoy mission to hide our real one. Even other members of our military will see us as moving around to recover those unexploded shells. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“That we need to lie even if questioned by the commander of the base?”

“Yes. No matter who asks you, you must not tell them about the secret material. And do not worry about what this material is. If it was passed over to Background to deal with, it must be surrounded by some rather dangerous circumstances. Looking into it will probably lead to your death. At any rate, just take the secret material from the stealth bomber and load it onto one of the trucks. The closest military airport is 80 kilometers away. If we can transport it there, Operation Christmas Boot will be complete.”

“Is it some panty thief’s collection?”

“That kind of joke will only invite death, Private Winchell.”

Still curled up thanks to the cold, Quenser raised a hand and asked, “Why are we loading the secret material onto one of the same trucks we’re riding in?”

“The Athabasca District is a battlefield country. It neighbors an Information Alliance base. If anyone intercepts information about the secret material, there is a great risk of being attacked. By having a few dummy trucks, the risk of the secret material being lost lessens."

“…So we’ll be blown away as one of the fakes.”

Quenser clicked his tongue and peered outside through a nearby gap in the canopy.

He saw a raging blizzard and several white mountains. The area they were in had plenty of conifer trees, but the mountains were

not completely covered in trees. In a few areas, the trees had been chopped down to create a smooth slope. He also saw some places with lines of metal towers presumably for a gondola.

“And this area was on the verge of being declared a safe country… I can’t believe all this came from the unstable condition of a single ski resort.”

“I hear the animal protection groups love it, though. Something about the falcons and bears that had almost been poached into extinction recovering their numbers.”

“Those people amaze me. The unemployment rate is going up and both soldiers and the homeless are dying off left and right, but they’re saying we need to use tons of tax money to protect the crows in the cities. Also, why is this truck tilted to the right?”

“That would be thanks to the ridiculously huge powered suit curled up over there.”

Heivia pointed with his thumb and the unrefined powered suit waved lightly at them with supple feminine movements.

A rectangular container case big enough to fit Quenser inside and likely filled with heavy weaponry was attached to the back of the suit’s left shoulder.

“Apparently it’s a fallen idol inside. She could supposedly sing perfectly, dance perfectly, and put on a perfect smile, but she was so perfect she wasn’t cute. She ended up taking part in these clean wars since her options were to be a battlefield reporter or go into porn, but she seriously messed up and got sent out here.”

“Is she beautiful?”

“They say she’s so beautiful she’s boring. I’ll never understand the idol business if that’s possible.”

“That’s the kind of tagline that would make other women hate her.”

“Oh, yeah. There were rumors about that as well. Some idiotic advertising firm said she was ‘more beautiful than the princess of

Volga', so she was forced to resign from her regular TV show due to lese majesty. It's quite a tragedy since the Perfect Idol herself never said a thing about the princess of Volga and it was just those around her getting carried away."

"Do you think maybe the princess of Volga was behind it?"

"I saw her at an evening party once. Naturally I didn't get a chance to speak with her at length or anything, but she hid behind her guards that were twice her height the entire time. She's just a kid that knows nothing of jealousy."

Quenser and Heivia were bored, so they decided to make a pass at the Perfect Idol. They moved over closer to the giant powered suit.

"Hey, hey. Do idols need to get a powered suit license for concerts these days?"

"I did have to get a construction license when we had a project to construct a small castle on my TV show."

"Since you're so heavily defended in there, do you have an insurance policy on your face?"

"The renewal period was last week, but it was most likely not renewed thanks to my mistake."

"But your idol office must not want you to get hurt if they issued you that powered suit."

"That depends on how much of an injury it is. I think they might actually want me to gain a certain level of weakness."

Quenser lightly tugged on Heivia's sleeve and whispered to him.

"(They certainly have quite the collection of people gathered here. But I get the feeling this isn't going to be a case where every member of the team uses their specialty to bring success to a reckless mission like in an action movie.)"

"(Yeah, freckles boy over there is just pissed that his handheld game system froze up. Come to think of it, why is he even playing an FPS

on a battlefield?)”

They seriously began to wonder if the Background Unit’s quick soldier replacement cycle (aka its high rate of deaths) was not due to facing powerful enemies but due to members of the unit tripping each other up.

“Men,” said the female leader as she knocked on the truck bed once more. “We will soon arrive at the site of the stealth bomber’s emergency landing. Operation Christmas Boot will begin once we do. Before we arrive, make sure you have your cocoa. That is the stick-shaped bag handed out to you all.”

Quenser frowned and asked, “What are we supposed to do with this? If we drink something strong smelling, we’ll be chased by dogs.”

“We might have to worry more about starving soldiers picking up the scent,” said Heivia.

“No, no.” The woman shook her head. “If unexpected trouble splits us up, we will not put together a team to retrieve you. Walking the 80 kilometers back to the military airport in this blizzard would be harsh. If your rations freeze over, they will be of no use. If that happens, you might be able to shed some tears onto the cocoa powder. Licking it bit by bit may save your life.”

“Seriously?”

“I see this job has a great welfare program,” commented Heivia.

Part 2

The stealth bomber was a flying wing that was shaped similar to a boomerang. The jet black craft showed up quite well in the white snowy mountains.

It had landed next to a frozen river in the gap between two mountains. The ground was covered in small rocks, so the bomber's wheels had of course been punctured. The craft could easily have lost its balance and burst into flames in that situation, so the pilot must have been quite skilled to neatly land there.

It seemed it was the right side of the craft that had been damaged by the missile. Black smoke was rising from the edge, but there was no other visible sign of damage.

"That's just a scratch. Why did it go down?"

"Flying wings have a large capacity but they have poor stability. It had to deal with this blizzard and there may have been turbulence up above."

The giant powered suit got out of the military truck and used an arc burner to cut away the bomber's hatch.

Once the powered suit had removed the thick hatch and waved over that the way was clear, the female leader peered inside the bomber.

That was when a gunshot rang out.

"Huh?"

"What? What? Why would she need to pull the trigger here!?"

The two boys got down and tried their best to hide behind the snow, but nothing more happened. They exchanged a glance and approached the bomber just in time to see the female leader exiting the hatch with blood splattered on her uniform. The red liquid quickly began to freeze.

“The secret material is inside. Carry it out.”

“What happened!?”

“We do not have time to carry the injured with us. We’re cutting it close with just ourselves. Why should we waste our effort on charity? Not to mention that a few of you would have to stay behind to make room for the injured.”

“…”

“Don’t give me that look. The crew of that bomber is also made up of soldiers not registered in any clean war. They won’t show up on the international lists of war dead. They’re the same as us. The report will only say some people died wearing Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms. We never had a chance to determine their identity, so they will be deemed cosplay-obsessed saboteurs.”

“I can’t believe you…” groaned Heivia, but there was nothing he could do.

Complaining about it would not bring back the dead.

The female leader paid him no heed and said, “Hurry, hurry. We need to do our best to make sure not even others from the Legitimacy Kingdom know what we are doing. I’ve heard that Unicorn is working undercover in this area. We do not want to run into them.”

“Please, no! I don’t want to hear that name!! It brings back all that trauma!!” shouted Quenser half in desperation, but he began working regardless.

First, he headed into the bloody cockpit and pressed the button to open the cargo door used to load bombs. The Perfect Idol used her giant powered suit to enter the back cargo bay, pick up a refrigerator-sized metal container, and carry it to the trucks. The sizes of the different containers varied.

Quenser left the bomber to escape the stench that made him sick to his stomach and asked the powered suit a question.

“How heavy are they?”

“About as heavy as a bronze statue.”

“I have no idea how heavy one of those is.”

However, it seemed they had no choice but to rely on the powered suit for the reloading work. The other soldiers scattered around the stealth bomber and kept watch. …Or perhaps they just wanted to leave an annoying job to someone else.

The number of boxes filled with the secret material was greater than expected. They filled three entire trucks.

That meant the soldiers initially divided into five trucks had to cram themselves into the remaining two.

Heivia groaned amid the foul heat, “This is horrible! Everything about this is horrible!! This is like a crowded train in southeast Asia!!”

“Yes, yes, but it is better than dying, isn’t it? Okay, we’re all loaded up now,” said the female leader offhandedly. “It’s time to leave. Is everyone aboard? If you aren’t on in time, we’ll leave you behind, so hurry up.”

The truck set off while shaking the truck bed horribly. The truck’s balance may have been thrown off by all the people aboard.

“This much weight isn’t going to blow a tire, is it?”

“The truck’s tires don’t have air inside. They’re filled with synthetic fiber all the way through. A lot of advances have been made in the field of shock absorption, so we might soon see a new weapon somewhere between a tank and an armored vehicle that has thick armor and moves at high speed.”

“Okay, I get it, you design nerd! Don’t add any more heat to this human sauna!!”

Incidentally, Quenser had ended up practically embracing the Perfect Idol, but he was hardly grateful since she was wearing that

giant powered suit. It was neither warm nor soft. The heat left him safe for the time being, but if a cold wind blew in through a gap in the canopy, he could easily have the skin of his cheek freeze to the armor plates.

Quenser then noticed a sound like a champagne cork being removed. The sound was coming from a great distance beyond the thick canopy.

“What is-…?”

Quenser did not even have time to finish his question.

He heard a great explosive noise and the truck came to a sudden stop.

There was nothing to grab onto in the jam-packed truck bed. With nothing to brace against as the truck slammed on its brakes, everyone in the back was thrown forward. Quenser distinctly heard a screaming noise come from his ribs.

“Gyahh!? Cough…what was that!?”

“Shit. Shit!! I think that was a mortar! I smell something burning. The front armored vehicle was blown away!!”

A mortar was shot up in the air like a long throw in baseball, so it fell down on top of the target. It was a simple weapon used all across the world.

“Eh? Wait! Then we need to force that armored vehicle out of the way! If we stay stopped here…!!”

In the next instant, they heard an explosion from directly behind them. The armored vehicle at the end of the convoy had likely been destroyed. With the front and back of the convoy destroyed, the trucks between them were stuck in place.

“This situation is so stereotypical, you could probably find it in a textbook!!”

“Get out, get out! The trucks are going to be taken out one by one!”

shouted the female leader as the soldiers began getting out of the truck bed all at once.

The Perfect Idol used her tremendous physical strength to rip apart the thick canopy and forced Quenser out the side of the truck.

But the enemy was not going to wait for them to scatter.

They heard the champagne cork sound once more.

“Scatter! Get down!!” came the female leader’s conflicting orders.

An explosive noise rang out.

Quenser’s vision became filled with white.

He thought his entire face had been crushed along with his two eyeballs, but it turned out the mortar that had landed a short distance away had only blasted snow up at him. But having snow slammed into his face at tremendous speed was enough to temporarily rob him of his sense of balance.

Heivia shouted from where he was lying on the ground nearby, “Quenser, you idiot! Crawl under the truck!! The armored vehicles were only taken out because the tires and suspension were destroyed. It wasn’t enough to get through the armor!”

“How are they aiming so accurately in the wind of this blizzard!? I thought the first two or three shots with a mortar were used as a baseline to aim from!?”

“It’s a GPS mortar! It just has to be fired up in the right general direction and then its tail moves based on GPS information from a satellite to strike the target. Scattering out across the snow will only get us targeted on a touch panel!!”

Quenser crawled across the snow and below the military truck as he shouted, “Then we need to jam it!!”

“The communications soldiers with the huge machinery on their backs were taken out first. As was that domineering woman commanding us!”

“She died that easily!? I thought she was going to be the final boss!!”

After a few more explosions, their number of allies had fallen considerably. Having the snow fly up at him hard may have saved Quenser by hiding him amid the grotesque scenery of red and black.

“This truck isn’t going to last repeated strikes. If we don’t do something soon, we’ll be crushed by the scrap.”

“There they are. There they fucking are. About 1700 meters to the northwest. A few Information Alliance troop transport vehicles are stopped near the foot of the mountain. The mortar is probably set up behind them!”

Quenser checked with his binoculars and he did indeed spot several vehicles that looked like tanks with the turret removed. Their armor looked thick enough that a rifle bullet would be useless against them. Not to mention that they were too far away.

Since mortars were initially fired up into the air, they could be fired continually while remaining behind cover.

“Where’s your shoulder-fired anti-tank missile!? Set it up already!!”

“I could blow up the troop transport vehicles they’re using as a shield, but the scrap would remain there. I can’t destroy the mortar team behind the trucks with it!” said Heivia in annoyance. “Our attacks can’t reach them. We can only sit here while they throw those baseballs at us. What are we supposed to do?”

“Hey, Heivia. Do you think they attacked us because they know about the secret material?”

“Are you saying we can survive by using the trucks with the secret material aboard as a shield?” Heivia frowned. “No one attacks with nothing but a GPS mortar. That’s just a portion of their force. Infantry will be creeping closer while they keep us in place with the mortar. I think those troop transport vehicles the Information Alliance is using as a shield are enough to hold 60 to 70 people.”

“Then what do we do? Either way, we need to destroy that GPS mortar as soon as possible.”

Quenser pulled a clay-like explosive out of his backpack and looked out from below the truck while stabbing a rod-shaped fuse into it.

He was looking for the Perfect Idol wearing the powered suit.

“Hey, hey! Can you still move? I’m going to blow snow into the air with a bomb in the place of smoke. Run to the front armored vehicle in the time that gives us!”

“That armored vehicle has already been destroyed!” she replied.

“That’s why you need to pull off just the turret! It fires based on an electric signal. You can fire it just by pressing together the torn off cords!”

Quenser crawled out from under the truck and threw the Hand Axe plastic explosive onto the snow. The powered suit was caught in the explosion, but the thick armor protected the Perfect Idol so she could run to the armored vehicle.

Heivia shouted from behind Quenser, “That won’t work, you idiot!! That’s an 80mm anti-personnel turret on the armored vehicle. It may look like a tank, but it’s only meant to tear human flesh apart with shrapnel. It doesn’t have the penetrative power needed to pierce the armor of those armored vehicles!!”

“I know that!” shouted Quenser as he crawled completely out from under the truck.

He stood up and ran toward the destroyed armored vehicle while keeping his hips low.

Several shells fell a short distance away from him.

They had not missed. The GPS mortar was very accurate. They were taking the lives of soldiers other than Quenser. It simply meant he was a low priority target who would be targeted later.

After the powered suit pulled the turret off of the top of the

armored vehicle, Quenser climbed below the suit. The shells were normally loaded automatically, but they could be manually ejected in case it jammed. Quenser pulled the thick lever and the loaded shell fell onto the snow.

The shell was about the size of three two liter thermoses stacked end on end. It was as heavy as if it was filled with metal.

“What are you doing?” asked the Perfect Idol.

“Switching out the fuse.”

Quenser opened the tip of the shell with a tool, replaced the fuse inside with one of the radio-controlled ones he usually used, and closed the cover.

He used his shoulders to forcibly lift up the shell and somehow managed to reload the shell despite his lower back letting out a cry of pain.

“Direction: 3409! Angle: 13 degrees!”

“That will not reach the troop transport vehicles being used as shields. It will fall before reaching them,” warned the Perfect Idol.

“That’s the point!” Quenser operated a tool below the turret, severed a few cords, and grabbed them in his hands. “Hold it in place. I’m about to fire!”

As soon as contact was made between the exposed wires, an explosive noise rang out.

Quenser was sent flipping over in the snow and the powered suit collapsed backwards, unable to withstand the shock.

He held onto his radio despite not being able to see where the shell was going. What mattered was the timing, not the exact location of the shell.

As the Perfect Idol had said, the shell did not reach the troop transport vehicles hiding the GPS mortar. It fell onto the snow in front of them.

But since he had swapped out the fuse, it did not detonate when it landed.

And what would it do then?

The force of landing was not enough to counteract the momentum from the tremendous speed at which it had been fired. The shell bounced. It bounced like a soccer ball that had been forcefully kicked.

It bounced right over the troop transport vehicles.

Right after it did, Quenser pressed the button on his radio.

The shell scattered hundreds of pieces of shrapnel while it was directly above the GPS mortar and the soldiers operating it.

“The GPS mortar has been silenced. Damn, that hurt my ears. This must be what it feels like for a deep sea fish to come up on land,” muttered Quenser as he lay flat on the white snow. He then shook his head and shouted, “Heivia! Check how many soldiers are still alive and if any trucks are still usable! Oh, and move out of the way, Miss Idol! Your giant ass almost crushed me!!”

“That is sexual harassment.”

“Don’t be stupid! Seeing that giant hunk of metal isn’t going to turn me on in the slightest!!”

Quenser struggled up to his feet, but very few soldiers were gathering around him. There had been about 150 of them to begin with and now only 10% of that remained.

“Were the crew for the trucks and armored vehicles taken out?”

“It seems the shrapnel from the mortars was enough to penetrate the trucks’ reinforced glass. The crew for the armored vehicle up front was taken out. Opening up the hatch to fire a machine gun turned out to be a bad idea. The shockwaves made their way inside.”

The survivors were not battle-hardened professionals. They were nothing but medics and supply soldiers with chef licenses. And Quenser himself was not much better.

Heivia trudged through the deep snow as he approached.

His expression was not one of relief.

“This is bad! We need to get out of here! Their main force is coming!”

“Their main force?”

“The GPS mortar was just supposed to hold us in place, remember!? From the number of troop transport vehicles, I would say there are 60 or 70 of them. With a group like this, we’ll just be mowed down!! I don’t know what this secret material is, but there’s no way we can push them back while protecting it!!”

Quenser used his thumb to point at the Perfect Idol inside her thick armor.

“If these are normal infantrymen, can’t we do something with our powered suit?”

“It just takes one shot from a shoulder-fired missile to deal with her! And what kind of armaments does our idol have? What’s inside the container case on the back of her left shoulder!?”

“Hm? A Morning Star and a few magazines,” she replied.

“Why that of all things!? That grenade machinegun tops the list for friendly fire!!”

Basically, it was a weapon that fired coffee can-sized grenades like a machinegun. Since it was heavy and had a lot of recoil, it was usually fixed on a stand or attached to a helicopter or armored vehicle.

“I was told it had the high score for attacks on terrorist compounds,” said the Perfect Idol.

“That’s just because the blasts fill up the narrow areas inside buildings. In a powered suit, you can just ignore the anti-personnel shrapnel, but any allies around you will be swallowed up by the storm of shrapnel.”

“I have a secondary 5mm sniper round I can use if the enemy soldier is near a hostage or computer.”

“But can you switch back and forth between rounds when bastards are popping out left and right as if from jack-in-the-boxes? You’ll just blow the rest of us to pieces. I don’t want to end up in a textbook as a cautionary example!”

Heivia could be surprisingly modest when his own life was on the line, but this was not a situation where they could be picky.

He began trembling when he saw the Perfect Idol pull that dangerous weapon out of the container case.

With a tone that made it sound like she was simply chatting, she asked, “How about we fight while using the secret material as a shield?”

“We’re outnumbered. There’s nothing we can do if they surround us and attack from multiple directions.”

“Hey, hey,” said Quenser to get the other boy’s attention. “Heivia, we need to go around to our fallen comrades and gather all the weapons that can fire over 1000 meters such as sniper rifles and rocket launchers. Then we scatter and leave this spot.”

“So we abandon Operation Christmas Boot?” asked the Perfect Idol.

“Fighting while protecting all of that stuff will be hard. And the same goes for the enemy.” He pointed at the military trucks. “So we’ll just swap the situation around. We give them the trucks and then fire our long range weapons from multiple directions to wear down their numbers. …Even if we’re outnumbered, the Information Alliance won’t be able to use their numbers properly while guarding those trucks.”

Part 3

Quenser's strategy was a success.

Not only did they target the enemy at a distance from multiple directions, but they also buried spare plastic explosives and shells from the armored vehicles under the snow before their temporary retreat. The two-waved attack of bullets from the distance and explosions beneath their feet was enough to rout the Information Alliance.

"How many times greater was their force? If this wasn't a covert mission, wouldn't this earn us medals?"

"Not necessarily. We'll be fleeing back to the base with 70% losses. And there are still more of them than us."

"They might call in reinforcements," pointed out the Perfect Idol. "We should get aboard the trucks and head to the military airport."

And so Quenser and the others chose new drivers to make use of the convoy of military trucks.

But before they began driving, they heard the sound of thunder clouds in the distance.

The temperature was minus 20 degrees, but Quenser still felt an unpleasant sweat appear on his skin.

"Not good… Not good!!"

"Hey, Quenser. Don't tell me that noise is…!"

"It is! It's a static electricity propulsion device. An Object is headed this way!!"

Something huge suddenly appeared from behind the mountains.

Its giant form was several dozen meters tall. It had over 100 different cannons. It was a giant weapon equipped with thick armor

that could withstand a direct hit from an MIRV meant to destroy large cities. That mass of steel was the symbol of war, but it seemed somehow different from the ones Quenser and the others had seen previously.

The spherical main body had been done away with for a more streamlined shape that resembled a rugby ball.

Its primary propulsion device was shaped similarly to a giant sled, but it also had several objects similar to rocket engines attached to the back of the main body.

“What is that? A Second Generation Object focused on speed?”

“The Object’s main body is spherical so that it can withstand large scale attacks from all directions including from nuclear landmines buried in the ground. This one has abandoned that possibility. This model had the front armor strengthened to focus on fighting other Objects because a nuclear attack is unthinkable in this day and age. The idea behind its design is different from the other models we’ve seen.”

This made the armor on the sides thinner than any of the other Objects they had seen and Quenser had a feeling it might be possible for old-style weapons to damage it, but he had no intention of battling that monster head on. Just looking at it told him its mobility was likely excellent. Once it noticed them, they could not escape it in trucks driving over the snow.

But luckily Quenser and the others still had the opportunity to escape left.

“Hey, what is that sound? Another one’s coming… Wait, isn’t that…!?”

“It is the Baby Magnum,” said the Perfect Idol.

“Shit. We’re in the middle of a covert mission. The princess and the others probably don’t know we’re here. If they start a battle here, we’ll be caught in the middle of it!!”

The surviving soldiers frantically climbed aboard the military trucks

and started the engines. Heivia got in one driver's seat, Quenser got in the adjacent passenger seat, and the powered suit got in the back. The truck noticeably slanted backwards.

"Hey, hey, hey! The Information Alliance's rugby ball is turning a cannon this way! It's probably spotted us!!"

"If we just head across the broad snowy field to the military airport, we'll just get shot, won't we!?"

"It seems to be focusing more on its battle with the princess right now, but I think it's waiting for a chance to attack us. It might also be hesitating because it doesn't know which truck has the secret material aboard. An Object's attack is too powerful."

"But how do we lose it? That thing is a mass of radars and sensors. Even if mountainous areas can cut off signals, we won't disappear so easily."

"Since you're in the passenger seat, you take care of the navigation!" Heivia used one hand to operate the steering wheel and used the other to operate the truck's navigation device. While looking at a small screen, he said, "Here we go, here we go. There's a tunnel. Tunnels were dug all throughout the mountains to act as shortcuts back when this was used as a ski resort. Its like a maze inside. We have to head in there!!"

Quenser used the truck's radio to inform the other trucks. As they drove full speed over the short distance to the tunnel, the two Objects began their battle.

The Information Alliance's rugby ball had the high mobility Quenser had expected, but it also possessed formidable ability in its quick footwork.

"Wah!? Quenser, did you see that!?"

"Eight lasers suddenly bent and surrounded the Baby Magnum!?"

Quenser's naked eyes were only able to see the afterimage of the orange striation of snow crystals being torn apart. But that image of the past that burned through his eyelids provided more than

enough of an impact to fill him with raw fear.

Those laser weapons that could attack at the speed of light were like the grim reaper to even the old-style of weapons, so the age itself had left flesh-and-blood soldiers far, far behind.

“Is it scattering a powder of photonic crystal? Since it can control the direction so accurately in this raging wind, they might be using some kind of nanotechnology.”

“How was the princess able to evade that? She determines when the enemy will fire from the motion of the enemy and its cannons, right? I don’t see how that method could allow her to deal with lasers that bend at a right angle.”

“Something has to be interfering with the light. She might be able to determine where that something is located using active ultraviolet sensors or something.”

The princess was firing in areas that had nothing to do with the rugby ball itself and that may have been a means of destroying that something ahead of time.

But that means was bad news for those caught on the battlefield.

The shells that missed fell here and there on the battlefield, creating craters. And naturally Quenser and the others’ direction was no exception.

“Dammit! We’re gonna die!! They need to be kinder to the earth!! The planet’s gonna split in two!!”

“Hey, Heivia. Which would you prefer to be killed by: your enemy’s cannon or your ally’s!?”

As Heivia somehow managed to control the military truck even as it began to slide to the side ominously, the convoy charged into the tunnel.

“It’s pitch black in here! Come to think of it, this is practically suicide!!”

“Slow down. We’re slowing down!” shouted Heivia into the truck’s radio. “We have no idea where there’s been a cave-in! The trucks’ headlights won’t be enough to see. Someone needs to get out in front of the trucks and check for fallen rocks or a cave-in!! Quenser, you’re not doing anything, so you get to do it!! In fact, everyone not driving get out!!”

Quenser opened the passenger side door that had been bent in the GPS mortar attack and got out. He also saw the Perfect Idol step down from the back of the truck in her powered suit.

“I can still see my breath, but it feels quite a bit warmer than before. Is that because the wind can’t reach us in here?”

“What is the tunnel like from here on?” asked the Perfect Idol.

“It’s not just a straight path. Several tunnels intersect so there are several paths to an exit. If we can get to the other side of the mountain, we should at least be hidden from that rugby ball’s sensors.”

“The main problem is whether the path to the exit has been blocked by a cave-in or not.”

“If only we knew for sure we had a path to an exit. Then we could use explosives to seal this entrance.”

And so Quenser and the others walked in front of the slowly moving military trucks to check for obstacles. Large pieces of concrete had fallen here and there. When they pointed their lights upwards, they saw several large cracks running through the tunnel ceiling. The pieces had fallen from there.

“…Just a fragment falling from there could probably split your skull open.”

Since two 50 meter Objects were clashing outside, it was not something they wanted to see. The tunnel would shake eerily every time one of the Objects fired. If a coilgun or something similar was fired directly at the mountain, the entire tunnel would likely collapse on them.

“So how far are we going to have to circle around to reach the military airport after crossing the mountain? Maybe we should have gathered rations from our fallen comrades.”

“One of the surviving soldiers has a chef’s license,” said the Perfect Idol.

“But what is he going to make food out of? What lives in these tunnels? Rats? Bats?”

Quenser shined his light on the tunnel wall and saw “7 km to the exit” written in scratched writing. It was a horrible distance given the circumstances. They had to be constantly watching their footing and trembling in fear of a cave-in while pushing the concrete fragments to the sides of the tunnel. He would have preferred taking inventory in a store.

“Keep up the good work, Miss Idol!”

“Yes, men who do not follow a ‘ladies first’ mindset are worth less than dog shit in the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

They made their way three kilometers through the tunnel while Quenser left the heavy lifting to his work partner. At that point, they reached an intersection between several tunnels.

Quenser shined his light around and said, “Are you kidding me? Not only are we in this dark tunnel, but we have to go with no traffic signal or stops. I hope everyone managed to stick together. They should call these things the demonic tunnels or something.”

“I detect a light source,” said the Perfect Idol as she used her powered suit’s default sensors. “It’s a metal drum. A few cinders are left over inside it. It seems someone frantically tried to put out a fire when they noticed us approaching.”

“I see it, I see it. …A truck is parked near the drum.”

Quenser reported the situation to the convoy and Heivia replied, “Is it from the Information Alliance?”

“How should I know? But it’s definitely a civilian model. It just

looks like a beat-up truck from a battlefield country."

Something happened before he could continue.

A gunshot rang out and sparks flew from the Perfect Idol's powered suit.

Quenser frantically dove behind her.

"We were fired on!"

"Is it the Information Alliance or the local people!?"

"I don't know, but they fired on us!!"

"Then fire back! Neutralize them!!"

"No! What if they're just civilians hiding here!? We're the ones intruding!!"

The Perfect Idol he was using as a shield sighed and spoke through her speaker.

"That isn't something you should say while hiding behind a girl."

"Shut up! Just stay where you are. Dammit!"

The powered suit casually waved its 150 cm grenade machinegun in one hand.

"Should I take them out with my Morning Star?"

"Whatever you do, stop her, Quenser!" shouted Heivia. "Don't let that amateur use that firepower that tops the lists for friendly fire!!"

But Quenser did not reply. While hiding behind the powered suit, he pulled out some Hand Axe plastic explosive.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Heivia! Throw me a pair of sniper earmuffs! I'm sure we have extra equipment with so much fewer soldiers!!"

Quenser could see something tossed toward him from the direction of the bright headlights. They looked like headphones but had no cord. Quenser put it on, pulled the Hand Axe out from his backpack, and stabbed a fuse into a small piece he tore off.

The Perfect Idol said something, but he could not hear her through the soundproofed earmuffs.

Whatever she had said, Quenser threw the plastic explosive in the direction the gunshots were coming from. The bomb fell to the ground before it reached the source of the sounds, but he pressed the button on his radio nevertheless.

He heard an explosion.

All of the gunfire stopped as soon as that great noise that pierced through the earmuffs rang out.

Quenser removed the earmuffs and said, “It’s nothing but an acoustic effect, you idiots. And it works instantly in an enclosed tunnel like this.”

“Dammit, Quenser!” shouted Heivia. “Tell us before you do something like that! You knocked out some of our guys too!!”

“Then we just have to wake up our guys and we win.”

Quenser and the Perfect Idol headed ahead of everyone else to the unknown force of people who had been firing on them. They found a large civilian truck, a metal drum stuffed with old magazines being used for a fire, and men wearing work uniforms collapsed on the ground.

“This isn’t enough to tell whether they’re civilians, local guerrillas, or camouflaged Information Alliance soldiers.”

“The truck is carrying unexploded shells. It's filled with them,” reported the Perfect Idol.

“That doesn’t tell us much either. They could be volunteers and they might have just been using it as camouflage for another mission like we were.”

Heivia spoke up over the radio, “They’re amateurs. They’re the ones that fired on us first. Professionals wouldn’t fire normal bullets against a thick powered suit. The first bullet would have blown Quenser’s head off.”

“Really?”

“Really. Anyway, tie them up and toss them aside. Those unexploded shells might be useful. If we swap out the fuses, we can add them to our firepower. We can also take the beat-up civilian truck.”

“So we’re going to steal from civilians?”

“They definitely fired on us, so I see no reason we should be that gentlemanly.”

One of their surviving comrades that could drive large vehicles climbed aboard the civilian truck. They drove slowly for fear of a further attack, but no obvious firefights occurred afterwards. Eventually, light from outside the tunnel faintly illuminated the exit.

“With the mountain in between, we should be able to slip past the Object’s sensors and radar to a certain extent. And with multiple exits from the tunnels, they can’t know which one we’ll exit through. Even if we have to make a wide circle around the battlefield, we need to head for the military airport while keeping out of sight of that Object,” said Heivia.

“How many degrees below zero is it outside? You make it sound like we’re safe now, but we aren’t going to freeze partway there, are we?”

“I think we have better odds winning against the weather than that Object.”

But as soon as they exited the tunnel, the thick layer of snow before their eyes was suddenly evaporated.

An explosively expanding mass of steam pushed Quenser back and he fell right back into the tunnel.

An area 50 meters back and 2 to 3 kilometers across of the white scenery had been liquefied, exposing the muddy dirt.

“What the hell was that!?”

“All the snow was evaporated for several meters ahead of us…?”

“It was the Object. It used that refracting laser to fire over the mountain and cut off our route!!”

But how?

With that giant mountain in between, the Object’s sensors and radar waves should have been reflected back.

“GPS,” said Quenser as he brought a hand to his forehead. “The Information Alliance was using a satellite to support that mortar. That means they can do the same for the Object. They can peer down at us from above like into a doll house, so having a mountain in between doesn’t matter!!”

The Perfect Idol gasped within her powered suit and said, “But then we can’t escape. If these military trucks are already marked, they will know where we are and attack no matter what route we take!!”

And if a single Object laser so much as grazed them, both humans and trucks would be turned to ash.

“What do we do, Quenser?” asked Heivia. “Head back into the tunnel?”

“They know where we are. In that case, we should assume they have infantrymen heading through the tunnels. Heading back in will just let them clean us out like these tunnels are bath pipes.” As he spoke, Quenser headed for the beat-up civilian truck filled with unexploded shells. “Miss Idol, you use your ridiculous strength to scrape the metal down to a powder and pack it in plastic bags. I’ll swap out all of the fuses in these used goods. If we scatter metal dust into the air, it might cut off their signal.”

A bomb would not explode without a fuse. The method to make an unexploded shell safe was to remove the fuse. But that also meant

they could be made to detonate once more by attaching a new fuse.

“Will that really work? There’s a blizzard raging out there. The chaff will be scattered in no time at all,” warned Heivia.

“How about we reload the secret material into the civilian truck? I know it’s a cheap trick, but it’s better than just using the military trucks.”

The idol in the powered suit started by loading the metal containers of the secret material. Quenser started using his tools to force open the tip of the unexploded shells, but then he heard a loud noise from behind him.

It seemed one of the containers being loaded had fallen to the tunnel floor.

“Hey, stop that, Miss Idol! The work I’m doing is more delicate than cleaning out your ears. Do you want me to blow us all up!?”

“Wait, come look at this.”

“What? Are you going to strip for me?”

Quenser turned around while continuing his work, but then he froze in place.

The metal container’s latch had come open when it had fallen and the secret material had spilled out.

It was a silver metal. It was in the form of brick-like blocks and each individual block was vacuum packed in plastic. Two letters of the alphabet and a purity had been engraved on the surface of the metal blocks that came rolling out.

“Li…Lithium? It’s a 99.999% ingot.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Another rare earth?” shouted Heivia.

“The market price is less stable than that of pure gold or platinum, so I thought it was ill suited to use for savings,” said the Perfect Idol. “A single piece of news about research into alternative

materials can greatly affect its value."

"But that also means it's a great commodity for speculation in stocks or futures."

The containers had filled three military trucks. That was about 20 tons.

"What's its market price today?"

"How should I know?" replied Heivia. "I don't like looking through all those detailed numbers in the newspaper. But I do know mining in the five great salt lakes was stopped, so it's skyrocketing. I heard its worth ten or twenty times what it was four years ago. Even with a cheaper estimate, a mountain of the stuff like this is probably worth more than a villa on the Aegean Sea. Of course, the value could drop like a rock depending on what happens."

"This is the secret to this covert mission?"

"Is it the secret savings of some high military official?" asked the Perfect idol. "But where did the money come from?"

"From the unexploded shells probably," said Heivia through the radio. "We may have used it as a cover, but the units at the military airport usually deal with that mission. And tax money is needed to pay for it. …But those amateurs we ran across a bit ago were doing it too."

"So they force the work on the local people to cut labor costs and pocket the savings. They converted it into difficult-to-trace speculative lithium for money laundering purposes and then put it on a stealth bomber to carry it to a safe location."

"But the stealth bomber was shot down by a fellow Legitimacy Kingdom surface-to-air missile where the Information Alliance is able to interfere?"

It all seemed to make sense.

But something still seemed odd.

“But then how did the Information Alliance learn about the secret material?” asked Quenser. “If the Object’s radar or the satellite had simply spotted enemy soldiers, they would not have fired a warning shot to stop us. We would have been wiped out in a single shot. They seemed oddly cautious about the trucks. Don’t tell me this means what I think it does…”

“So all of this was part of the plan, including handing the lithium over to the Information Alliance?” groaned Heivia. “It can probably all be summed up in the word ‘bribery’. They cannot hand money over to an enemy nation in the form of cash. But this lithium is a secret material that ‘does not officially exist’. And our mission is considered a secret. If we die, we won’t even be counted on the official list of war dead. And so…!”

“There is nothing that can officially be done if the lithium we are transporting is taken by the Information Alliance,” added the Perfect Idol. “They are using the fact that this is a covert mission that does not officially exist.”

“Are you saying everything from the bomber being shot down to the Background Unit being attacked was nothing but a safe method for a Legitimacy Kingdom officer to hand this money over to the Information Alliance? Operation Christmas Boot was nothing more than a way to give a present to an enemy nation? Over 100 of us died!! This was all just some stupid traitor trying to help the enemy!?”

Lithium would melt at 179 degrees, but there was a risk of it burning away if that was done in air. That may have been why the Object did not want to end everything with a bombardment. No one wanted to turn their high-priced prize to ash.

“I can’t believe this! How expendable do these people see us as? If we stick with this mission, not a single one of us will be left. Some fatass is lining his pockets using our lives!!” shouted Heivia.

“…”

Quenser fell silent.

He traced his finger across the surface of the unexploded shell he had started to exchange the fuse in.

“One of the supply soldiers has a chef’s license, right? Bring him here.”

“Are you planning to destroy a second generation Object with nothing but a wok and a spatula? Or will you need some sesame oil and doubanjiang, too?”

“No,” he immediately replied. “What I need is engine oil, some metal containers, and the liquid nitrogen used when removing the fuses.”

“?”

“The piece of shit officer who ordered the Background Unit to do this is waiting for us to run into the Information Alliance unit or its Object and be annihilated. In that case, what we need to do to win is obvious: we just have to find a way to avoid fighting either of them.”

Part 4

The Information Alliance military satellite instantly spotted the large truck exiting the tunnel.

But it was not a military truck. It was a beat-up civilian truck. The back canopy had been removed and a large number of unexploded shells were visible in the back.

There was no sign of the lithium ingots.

Hiding such massive pieces of metal was not easy. They could be hidden under the clothes of the soldiers scattered around the truck and attached below the truck's body, but that would only count for a tenth of the total amount.

They may have given up.

That was the conclusion the Information Alliance satellite officer came to. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers must have been aware they were being watched from the sky because they were looking up and waving their rifles with white handkerchiefs attached to the barrel. (However, the handkerchiefs had frozen in the cold.)

The satellite officer contacted the Second Generation Snipe Laser 051.

"It appears the Background Unit we were told about is headed to a civilian residential area in the Athabasca district rather than the Legitimacy Kingdom military airport. International law does not allow an Object to attack a residential area. This is our last chance to attack."

"Checking on the undeniable sign of their surrender comes first. They have likely left their military trucks and lithium ingots in the tunnel. As long as we can retrieve them, nothing else matters."

"So we let them go?"

"Deserting on the battlefield is a serious crime in any nation. Our

interference is not needed."

With a crackle of static, another transmission cut in.

It was from their "customer" in the Legitimacy Kingdom.

"Have you confirmed receipt of your payment?"

"We are doing so right now, lieutenant colonel. We will open the air route after we do," said the satellite officer while beginning to think to himself.

The situation was not good.

The Snipe Laser 051 was a collection of cutting edge laser technology. It had overwhelming speed and high power laser cannons that's lasers could be freely bent using photonic crystals. It had been shown to have a use beyond simply fighting in battles.

Namely, it could block an air route.

The anti-air lasers equipped on the Object were the natural enemy of all forms of aircrafts. But by determining what route the Object's giant form would take and obstructing its path with an Object of your own, you could secure an air route for passenger planes.

However…

The Snipe Laser 051 was a Second Generation Object with laser attacks that could be complexly bent and overwhelming speed bought at the expense of the ability to withstand a nuclear attack from any direction. That made it not too difficult to slip through the gaps in the existing pressure tactics and shoot down a passenger plane on a supposedly safe air route.

When the Legitimacy Kingdom had become aware of this threat, it had offered the lithium. In exchange, the Information Alliance would promise not to interfere with the air routes in the Athabasca district using the Snipe Laser 051. That was the agreement.

At first glance, it appeared to be a victory for the Information Alliance's technology.

If Objects with the same concept as the Snipe Laser 051 were mass produced, the state of the war could seemingly be turned completely around.

(But the Information Alliance's conservatives do not like the Snipe Laser 051 with its armor that cannot withstand a nuke. If it takes any actions that stand out too much, it could be surrounded and have concentrated fire poured on it. The Snipe Laser 051 focuses its defenses towards the front, so it is weak to attacks from multiple directions at once.)

The Snipe Laser 051 was certainly part of a new age, but the age was unable to keep up with it and was therefore tripping it up.

In that way, it may have been an Object forced to bear a certain type of tragedy.

"The infantrymen have discovered the military trucks in the tunnel," reported the Elite.

"Hurry it up," said the Legitimacy Kingdom officer. "If the soldiers you overlooked send an SOS to the military airport, we will have to send out a search team."

"They have found 50 containers. Just as we were told. …But what is the meaning of this, lieutenant colonel?"

"?"

"The containers are empty. There is nothing inside. Where is the promised lithium?"

"Impossible… I made sure it was inside! I know! Those survivors must have taken it with them! That is the only explanation!!"

"But how? That truck had nothing but unexploded shells inside. I do not think there was enough space to hide that much lithium."

The satellite officer sighed.

He had a good idea what had happened.

Lithium would melt at 179 degrees. And the explosives in the shells could be melted and removed by heating them in hot water.

In other words, the explosives in those giant bombs had been melted and removed and then the melted lithium had been poured in instead.

If lithium was heated in the air, it would burn. But if a small container was placed inside a larger container, the liquid nitrogen used for removing fuses from shells was returned to a gas and used to fill them, the trucks' engine oil or something similar was heated up like cooking oil, and the lithium was immersed in it, it was possible. If the group had someone with some skill as a cook, it could be easily pulled off.

But the satellite officer had no obligation to faithfully report that conclusion just because he had determined the answer.

He was from the Information Alliance and they were from the Legitimacy Kingdom.

He would speak with them when it benefitted him, but he would cut off contact when it no longer benefitted him. He would only reward them when the payment offered was provided.

"Now then, lieutenant colonel," said the Elite. "Since the promised payment has not reached us, our actions are limited."

"Wait! They have to be somewhere. The lithium ingots have to be somewhere! N-no, I can prepare more money if you need it. So please!!"

"First, we need to leave a clear sign. A sign showing what happens to those who make fools of us. And lieutenant colonel, we know the location of your transport plane… Do you catch my drift?"

The Snipe Laser 051 was disliked by some of the higher ups of the Information Alliance because it was too cutting edge.

But the means of escaping that situation were quite simple:

Earn enough victories that the higher ups had no choice but to

admit its usefulness.

Part 5

“He was just blown away.”

“That he was. Doesn’t this make us terrorists?”

A bright flash of light as if from welding could be seen in an area of the white snowy sky. It was all they could see of an anti-air laser roasting a transport plane. The main dish was of course the Legitimacy Kingdom lieutenant colonel who had ordered the Background Unit to their deaths.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others were not in the Legitimacy Kingdom military airport. They were instead in the city of Maple Queen, a civilian residential area in the Athabasca district. It had originally been a small town filled with lines of short buildings only 3 to 5 stories tall, but a lot of run-down houses had been constructed on top of those flat roofs, creating a very chaotic picture. The disorderly construction and piles of snow on top had even caused some of the buildings to collapse.

The roads were not in a normal state either. Some areas were blocked by the collapsed buildings and vehicles would sometimes drive through buildings that had lost their walls.

“Our mission was to transport the secret material to the military airport, not to be killed by the Information Alliance so they could retrieve the secret material. Their containers may have changed, our route may have been greatly altered, and the time schedule may have been thrown way off, but that isn’t enough to court martial us.”

“I see. So we can say we did our duty as long as we bring these unexploded shells to the military airport.” Heivia tapped on the bed of the beat-up civilian truck. “But are we really going to do the right thing and bring it in? This is worth more than a villa on the Aegean Sea.”

“Of course we are. But our mission was only to transport the secret

material to the military airport. No one is left there who wants it, so who's to say we can't just load it onto our flight home?"

"That's just wrong."

"Yeah, it is," agreed Quenser before beating on the nearby powered suit with his palm. "Let's get something to eat before swapping out vehicles. We'll buy something for you, so watch the truck."

"I want a teriyaki burger," replied the Perfect Idol.

"That'll have a bite to it after nothing but flavorless rations. Let's go, Heivia."

Quenser and Heivia left the truck and headed for the filthy supermarket on foot.

"I wonder where we'll be sent next. Will we be stuck in the Background Unit? It's been pretty much destroyed."

"Wherever we go, it'll be hell. Even if the rate for that lithium is low, we should hurry up and cash it in and put the money in an electronic bank account. We don't want it to be confiscated due to the restrictions on personal possessions."

"Is there no way we could end up heading to a clean and safe office district where we would wear suits?"

"I don't care where we go as long as it isn't South America. The Amazon district would be the worst."

"Why?"

"Read a newspaper sometime, you idiot. The Royal Duel to determine the successor to the throne of the Volga district is going to be held there. That means there will be a clash between Objects. I don't want to end up caught in the middle of that."

However, worthless soldiers like Heivia and Quenser had no say in where they were deployed. Since worrying about it would do nothing to help, they decided to forcibly change the subject.

“Hey, Quenser. What do people eat around here? Salmon? Seals?”

“Burger restaurants are the same the world over. I’m more worried about whether they’ll accept Legitimacy Kingdom euros or not.”

“A dirty battlefield country will have money-exchangers everywhere.”

But they were ultimately unable to purchase any burgers with their euros.

This was because the civilian truck loaded with lithium behind them suddenly exploded.

In all seriousness, they stopped breathing. Not only that, they were thrown several meters forward. Unable to stop their momentum, they continued to roll across the snow. Once they stopped, they looked at the site of the explosion while still collapsed on the ground. There was too much dust in the air to see the civilian truck. The wall of a nearby building had been completely ripped off. The powered suit with its thick armor was collapsed on the ground. It had to have been almost in the middle of the blast, but its armor must have been enough because its thick fingers were repeatedly twitching.

“Cough, cough! Shit, what was that? Wasn’t that our truck!?”

“There was no reason it should have exploded! All of the shells were filled with lithium. We made sure it was airtight with nitrogen and rubber, so it should have been stable!!”

“Then why did it blow up!?”

Quenser bit his lip slightly at Heivia’s question.

He began speaking as he got up from the snow that was strewn with fragments of wreckage.

“I can think of only one possibility: the truck was switched out with a different one at some point.”

“Switched-…What?”

“Switched out! The truck was moving slowly through this residential area and all its complex additions. Only the driver was onboard. We were scattered around protecting it. If that driver was an enemy, they could have secretly switched out the truck with an identical model while driving through one of the half-collapsed buildings!”

The truck and unexploded shells Quenser and the others had used were originally from that civilian city. If someone had given advance notice, it would not have been difficult to prepare an identical truck and shells.

That meant they knew what they had to look into first.

“We swapped out different drivers in shifts, right? Who was driving last?”

“The guy with the chef’s license. You know, the one who heated the engine oil to melt the lithium.”

“Then he’s the one that betrayed us.”

“Who is that damn cook working with!? The Information Alliance!?”

“If they knew the unexploded shells had the lithium in them, that rugby ball would not have let us leave. They would have used their infantrymen to slaughter us and take the lithium.”

“Then who’s the enemy here!?”

“How should I know!?” spat out Quenser. “But whoever they are, how did they detonate the shells? Was it a time bomb? No. They had no idea when we would realize the truck had been switched out. They would want to erase all evidence by blowing it away at the timing of their choice, so they definitely used a radio signal.”

“How does that help u-…Wait a second.”

“That’s right, Heivia. A radio signal wouldn’t reach far in this winding slum. …He’s nearby. The bastard that pressed the button is nearby! If we can capture him, we should be able to figure out who

it is!!”

Heivia grabbed the assault rifle hanging from his shoulder and looked around the area.

On the second floor of a dirty building, a man peering out a window in their direction moved back at the sight of the gun barrel. But he was not simply panicking. It was a slight difference in behavior, but he was clearly assuming the barrel would soon be pointed in his direction.

“That bastard!!”

Trusting in the penetrative power of the assault rifle, Heivia fired a short burst toward the wall of the second story, but he doubted he hit the man. He heard the sound of a window shattering on the reverse side of the building. The two boys frantically ran in that direction and saw the man jumping down.

Their eyes met for an instant, but the man did not hesitate to turn tail and flee.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“Dammit, I can’t fire! This rifle is too powerful. The risk of hitting a civilian is too great!!”

Heivia grabbed his handgun instead and Quenser stabbed a fuse into a plastic explosive to get the civilians behind cover, but the man was already gone.

But they still had a clue.

When the man had jumped down from the second story, his jacket had been blown open. And that had revealed a distinctive sign hidden around the man’s neck.

“…Did you see that, Quenser?”

“Yeah, scars from stiches reaching completely around his neck.”

That was the sign of the Legitimacy Kingdom Unit that had

disguised itself as the bodyguard unit known as the Night Edge Platoon on the Cook Addition Islands.

The 202nd Mobile Support Company.

The dark team rumored to carry out secret missions around the world. The unit that's mystique had supposedly saved dying tabloids that started following them.

"Unicorn!!"

Chapter 3: The Conspiracy Bank that Motivates Human Greed > > Bombardment Battle in the Amazon District

Part 1

Details of the incident involving the explosion of unexploded shells loaded into a civilian truck:

Three dead, two injured. No civilian deaths.

The unexploded shells were an old-style weapon used by independent local guerrillas, but remains of the fuses discovered were that of a Legitimacy Kingdom model. It is possible they were intentionally detonated.

The reason the suspects Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell were in the Athabasca district civilian residential city of Maple Queen is unknown. However, local camera footage confirms that they led the civilian truck into Maple Queen.

The two insist the explosion was due to the interference of the 202nd Mobile Support Company aka “Unicorn”, but no evidence of this has been found. Also, no proof has been found to indicate the existence of the supposed 20 tons of lithium ingots.

It is estimated the suspects are almost certainly guilty, but the Background Unit does not officially exist. Also, Operation Christmas Boot is being treated as “negative noise”. That is, it will not remain in the official records, so we cannot view the documents at our level of authority.

As such, investigation of the battlefield cannot be continued according to the formal methods.

Since a court martial under standard regulations cannot be carried out either, the rest will be handed over to the Black Uniforms in charge of barrier duty.

…On a personal note, I seriously hope the Black Uniforms end up shooting the suspects.

Part 2

The Amazon district in South America was technically classified as a battlefield country, but in reality it was almost entirely under the control of the Legitimacy Kingdom. It freely used cutting edge technology to be an overly hygienic-seeming powerful player in the primary sector thanks to the living resources of all the flora and fauna in its vast jungles, the research and patents on the caffeine and other substances extracted from coffee beans, and the foreign currency acquired from its large scale plantations centered on bioethanol.

One primary political issue existed. The Legitimacy Kingdom preferred to control a territory via a local monarch, but they had to choose between setting up a king from the indigenous people whose culture continued back for thousands of years or from the European population that had arrived during the Age of Exploration and now made up 90% of the population. Either choice could have explosive consequences.

Even though it was relatively stable, it was still a battlefield country. A certain city that could simply be described with the word “motley” displayed that distinct characteristic of the Amazon district. A small barracks had been forcibly added to the side of a building overflowing with a sense of cleanliness that had been built for a community campaign. Both trash and actually usable items had been piled up on the sidewalk. According to economic commentators, it would take another 10 years before they would realize the value of those items.

An open-air café existed in one corner of that cityscape that looked like it had been forcibly put together using pieces from a few different jigsaw puzzles.

Stores that served such nasty coffee were rare in a great coffee nation like that. The draw was neither the product nor the waitress’s smile; it was the money to be made gambling at dominoes. A suspicious-looking group sat at one of the tables.

However, they could easily hide their out-of-place aura in a place like that.

The group all had a crest on their shoulder showing a horse with a spear stabbing into its forehead.

That was the symbol of the 202nd Mobile Support Company aka Unicorn.

“Sogia, should you really be smoking a cigar?” A relatively fair-skinned young man spoke to a large man whose neck seemed to be as thick as his skull. “If you keep smoking them this much, you’ll get dogs chasing after you. They still use them as cheap sensors.”

“Just because we’re in the Amazon district doesn’t mean we’re going to be having shootouts in the jungle. It will be easier to blend in if you smell like civilization. …Mars, you smell like a wild animal. That isn’t good for a city. You need to take a shower and put on some cologne. Like a gentleman.”

“Tch,” came a click of the tongue from a silver-haired, brown-skinned woman named Sanya at the same table. “That’s the problem with newcomers.”

“What does this have to do with me being a newcomer!? Can you answer me that!? Not to mention that I’ve been with you for three years now!!” cried Mars in a shrill voice, but this was nothing new so no one at the table paid him any heed.

The final person at the table, a boy with a small build, poked at some domino tiles and spoke up hesitantly.

“…I feel kind of bad about what we did to those two.”

The boy had very recently played the role of a supply soldier with a chef’s license.

In response, Sogia smiled because he was more used to that kind of thing.

“You mean the Dragon Killers? Flat, people tend to meet a horrible fate when they get philosophical on the battlefield. By the way,

what happened to the lithium? Whose job was it to deal with that?"

"Mine," said Sanya as she raised her hand. "I melted it down once more just to be sure and then put it into a reserve fund. The rate was 0.75."

"That's a rip off."

"Well, yes. They were completely taking advantage of us, so I had

the rare earth transport ship sunk on the way back. Hopefully that makes them rethink the rates they give people. But the money was sent to the Information Alliance via check. It seems they are willing to send out a terrorist group they finance."

"That's fine then," replied Sogia in an offhand tone as he lightly scratched at his neck with his index finger.

Just like the others, he had scars from stiches circling around his neck.

It was the symbol of the ceremony undertaken when entering Unicorn.

"The other units scattered around have mostly succeeded in making their connections as well. And now we have somehow managed to acquire the final piece. I suppose it's about time we begin. Contact Colonel Marechiare."

In an attempt to look cool, Sogia punctuated his statement by taking a sip of his coffee, but he ended up spitting the black liquid onto the ground because it tasted so bad.

He then said, "We've prepared all these delicious ingredients. Let's treat those spoiled Legitimacy Kingdom VIPs to a wonderful meal."

Part 3

A certain military base existed in the Amazon district.

It was a large-scale facility that was equipped as both a large-scale naval base and airport and functioned as a relay base to resupply Objects. None of those giant weapons were present at the moment, but plenty of cruisers, interceptors, and other types of normal military power were gathered there.

This story begins along the fence encircling the facility grounds.

“This is horrible,” muttered Quenser in the intense humidity of the hot sun that seemed perfectly suited to a demotion.

He must not have been able to accept his circumstances because his voice quickly grew to a shout.

“This is horrible!! I can practically feel everyone staring at us!! They’re monitoring us as closely as the authorities monitor a sex cult! Can’t someone do something about this!?”

“Well, yelling about it isn’t going to help. Unicorn was simply better than us. We were watching them from below and the bird shit they dropped down landed right in our faces.” Heivia sounded annoyed. “And on top of that, we ended up in the last place I wanted to be: the Amazon district. Everyone is super agitated with the Royal Duel to determine the ruler of the Volga district coming up. I get the feeling this is something else that will take years off our lives. Things have gotten pretty rough in Volga since the White Bears of the 115th kicked the bucket.”

The people who had been loitering around with large pieces of equipment were likely from television stations. They had no idea if they were local media or foreign media though.

Naturally, the camera crew and announcers would never approach the area for the Royal Duel where two Objects would be clashing, but it was possible they could pull in decent ratings just by getting

distant footage and providing narration.

“I don’t care about kings. No one like the witch in Cinderella actually exists. Commoners have no chance of going to any of those fancy balls.”

To Quenser, getting dragged into problems related to who inherits the throne or not was a trivial difference. He was more concerned about how deeply he had sunk into the Unicorn’s conspiracy.

The issue was the bombing disguised as unexploded shells in order to steal the lithium.

“Do you think we can reveal the truth?”

“It doesn’t matter. If we end up firing our guns to reveal that truth, we’ll just be thrown into prison for that new crime. This isn’t a Hollywood movie, so the truth doesn’t get you off the hook for the fights on the way there,” said Heivia in annoyance. “Luckily, the fact that it was a covert mission worked to our advantage. If we keep our mouths shut, we can at least avoid getting handcuffed. But it does mean the money we had saved up is all gone!!”

Even when left on a tropical island to do nothing but rot, they ended up causing their own trouble.

Even when forced to carry out suicide missions in the Arctic, they ended up surviving and spreading problems everywhere.

And so it seemed Quenser and Heivia were too much for the higher ups to handle. They had the feeling that they were well on their way to getting a gift of a bullet to the head along with a fake report that they resisted during the inquiry.

They could no longer fight it.

They could only obediently perform the simple work they were given while under the direct surveillance of the government.

That was more or less what was behind the decision to send them to the “relatively safe” battlefield of the Amazon district. Even if the local delinquents spat on them, they could only smile and pull out a

handkerchief. If they didn't, they would be shot. That was made abundantly clear even if it was never stated.

Heivia leaned against the fence and looked around in annoyance.

"Those Black Uniforms are as diligent as ever. I can't believe anyone would actually wear a pure black uniform in this heat. Are they trying to show off their usefulness at the end of the fiscal year?"

"What are the Black Uniforms?"

"Didn't I explain this to you already? They're an independent division that specializes in investigating crimes committed by soldiers on the battlefield. Simply put, they're a unit that shoots people from their own country. Any obstruction to their investigation will be met with gunfire. And they will often aim in the complete wrong direction."

"…So are they like our natural enemy?"

"Don't be stupid. Right now, everyone is our enemy. At any rate, just do as you're told. Don't crack any jokes. They have no sense of humor, so they could very well shoot you over it."

"I wonder if I could get off the hook since I'm a student rather than a soldier."

"If that's supposed to be a joke, I'll shoot you for them."

The issue of jurisdiction actually was quite tricky, but Heivia kept silent about that. It did him no good to let Quenser get excited all on his own.

But trouble had a way of appearing on its own when one most wanted things to go smoothly.

This time, it began with a large envelope meant to hold documents.

More accurately, it was the Latin man holding it.

"Hey, hey. So you two are the rumored Dragon Killers. I came to

give you a warm welcome as a fan. This is filled with documents on Unicorn, that unit you have been having so much trouble with."

"…No thanks. We don't have any money."

"That's fine. Just take it. I am not asking for money. I said I was a fan, remember?"

The Latin soldier forced the envelope into Quenser's hands and quickly left.

"What are we supposed to do with this?" asked Quenser.

"Don't ask me. Don't look at me either. The Black Uniforms are already glaring this way thanks to your irregular actions. You can get yourself shot if you want, but don't drag me into it," whispered the complete chicken that was Heivia.

Quenser sighed and flipped over the large envelope. He spotted a handwritten note on the edge.

"Hurry up and get shot, you traitorous motherfucker."

Quenser looked back towards the Latin soldier in time to see the man blatantly raise his middle finger.

"Isn't this wonderful? It's like a prison welcome party," said Quenser so cheerfully it sounded as if he was about to begin humming.

In exasperation, Heivia said, "You're like the prime example of a dumbass."

"This entire naval base is filled with honor students of the worst kind. They won't allow you to step out of line in the slightest. And from what I hear from the rumors spreading over the internet, they attack without restraint once someone or something has been deemed evil. When they shoot an innocent person, they have no problem insisting they were a victim as well since they were led astray by the provided intelligence."

It seemed the people of the naval base were hoping Quenser and

Heivia would risk their lives by acting as comedians to the Black Uniforms. Basically, they had no problem with an “accident” occurring.

Quenser clicked his tongue and opened the envelope.

Looking puzzled, Heivia said, “You’re really opening it? That can only invite trouble. And I highly doubt it has any useful information inside.”

“The trouble began from the moment it was handed to us. See how that scary lady is glaring at us?”

“What if there’s a bomb inside?”

“If it’s a bomb, I’ll have to examine the contents carefully.”

Luckily, it contained nothing but documents.

Several areas were covered up in black, but it was properly formatted.

“Let’s see, let’s see, um… Wait a second. What’s that smell? I’m trying to concentrate, but it’s growing stronger.”

“Trash. It’s coming from the piles of trash. It’s overflowing into the roads and walking paths. The wind is sending the smell right to us. I hear they throw out everything from bundles of old magazines to politicians’ mistresses. Some idiots go around collecting the working appliances, so some people mistakenly assume they’ll pick up any kind of trash. That’s why it’s absolutely everywhere.”

“Do they recycle the politicians’ mistresses, too?”

“Get back to concentrating.”

“…This is a bit too much to read through out of curiosity. If only they had a girl write her email address on the edge of each page.”

Quenser began reading through the documents while grumbling.

The 202nd Mobile Support Company aka Unicorn. Their primary role is

to hide within a battlefield and destroy the enemy Object's maintenance base's transport vehicles and the routes for those vehicles. Simply put, they stealthily sabotage the support for the enemy Object.

However, it seems the true purpose behind hiding within the battlefields is to create points of contact with the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, the Faith Organization, and even local guerrillas and terrorist groups that are not affiliated with any world power.

In other words, they carry out prior consultations to avoid a long, drawn out war.

They use tricks behind the scenes to rig the outcomes of the clean wars.

"What do you think?"

"Nothing much. This is exactly like the sort of conspiracies you see on the two hour end-of-the-year TV specials."

When they attack the base of some local guerrillas, they then sell the old-style weapons found there to a different local terrorist group. They launder money given to them by the Faith Organization and pass it on to the Capitalist Corporations. They assassinate a local influential figure and use the chaos to get hired as bodyguards for another influential figure.

However, these sorts of activities are also often carried out on official missions by the intelligence department.

The problem is that their actions leave the control of the higher ups in the military once they are hidden in the battlefield.

Quenser frowned as he flipped through the report.

"What is it, Quenser?"

"What is Rank 3?"

"The risk level for dangerous elements that have an exceedingly high possibility of using biological or chemical weapons. Why?"

Unicorn's main force is officially made up of around 200 members, but

it is unknown how far their force spreads when their connections with other world powers are included. And all of those they have a cooperative relationship with help support the rigged battles by carrying out dirty jobs.

Unicorn's ultimate objective is unclear, but if they truly are creating a network outside the influence of the higher ups of the military, there is a large risk of our Objects being destroyed or damaged by enemy Objects due to information being leaked.

The tactical risk reaches Rank 3.

We must immediately look into whether they are even truly a part of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

Quenser clicked his tongue and pulled a lighter out of his survival kit.

Heivia saw him set fire to the documents and asked, "So what did you find out?"

"Nothing much. Although it seemed more credible than the idea of making burgers out of earthworms. But it was given to us primarily to cause trouble, so I have no idea how much of it was true."

"You sure have grown up."

"If some earth-shattering conspiracy could be found on a document someone hands you for nothing in return, we could solve it all by handing the document over to the Black Uniforms. What a pain in the ass. Why would we jump at this obvious bait?"

As he spoke, Quenser let go of the burning envelope. He did not even look down as the bundle of documents fell to the ground. Their goal was clear. All they needed to do was work through their disciplinary period and return to the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. And so they would patrol the area around the naval base according to their time table, keep their appearance impeccable, and put on a huge smile and approach any elderly locals needing directions. They could only put up with it while reminding themselves it was better than being a fast food worker who had to

bow down to a horribly gourmet customer who was expecting the flavor of a noble-only salon out of the fast food restaurant's 1 euro coffee.

But reality was not so kind.

Half of the trouble in the world came uninvited.

This time, the air-raid siren sounded.

By the time the deep electronic tone began blaring around the naval base, the situation was already underway.

The interceptors waiting by the runway could not be scrambled in time. Several small shadows passed overhead and into the air above the naval base.

When he saw something long and narrow leave one of the wings, Quenser shouted out while still looking up into the air.

"What!? Why didn't the radar catch them!?"

"You idiot!! If you have time to complain, get down!!"

Immediately after Heivia tackled Quenser to the ground, the long and narrow items accurately struck the naval base's buildings.

Great roars, shockwaves, and explosive blasts.

Those were what stabbed into their eardrums, squeezed their insides, and sent a fear of death stabbing into the two boys even from several hundred meters away. Quenser's heart rate shot up and an unpleasant sweat flowed from his body.

"An aerial bombing? What happened to the clean wars filled with Objects and anti-air lasers!? The airport has lost almost all functionality, hasn't it!?"

"Those are known as Apoptosis UAVs. They're ground attack UAVs developed by the Faith Organization." Heivia rolled off of and away from Quenser. "They were an option for a submarine aircraft carrier project they really seemed to love. They're unmanned attack craft

made as small and light as possible. However, the actual aircraft carrier was too big. It disturbed the ocean too much as it moved, so it could be detected right away. I thought the project had been frozen. …Then again, it's also said some high military official who wanted to keep Objects as the primary weapons found unneeded fault with it."

"Then what are those? They weren't fired from the bottom of the ocean, right!?"

"Development of the Apoptosis itself was a success. As I said, they're small and light. That makes them perfect to carry around while keeping them hidden. To make up for the debt of that failed project, the Faith Organization was selling them to anyone who would pay. These days, they're seen as the symbol of terrorism."

They heard gunfire coming from within the airport's grounds. Heivia continued his explanation as the sounds of the counterattack continued.

"With additional booster and launcher equipment, they can be fired vertically. They probably took off from a line a few hundred meters away but within the naval base's defensive line. That's why the early warning radar didn't catch them in time."

"Hey, wait a second. Why are they firing their assault rifles?"

"There's no way they'll hit. They're probably just panicking."

"Then why are some of them aiming this way!?"

"God dammit!! Are they blaming us again!? Do they think we're remotely controlling these toys!? Ahh, it's that damn Latin guy. He's staring down the sights with a look that says 'I'm an honor student'!!"

Quenser and Heivia frantically ran away from the fence and dove behind a pile of trash by the side of a civilian road.

The stench made Quenser grimace.

"I feel like I sold my pride to buy my life…"

“And why is this pile repelling rifle bullets? I thought those rifles could shoot through one side of a car and out the other.”

“I guess bundles of old magazines and old appliances are just that great.”

Suddenly, Quenser felt a small vibration in his pocket.

He pulled out his handheld device and said, “Oh, I’ve received something.”

“Is it a satellite image!? If we could see the distribution of the enemy controlling the UAVs…!!”

“No, it’s just emails from both the marriage scam artist Genelia and the Perfect Idol.”

“Both of those are lovely jobs filled with dreams!! But they are completely useless right now! And when the hell did you exchange email addresses with them!?”

“Oh, wait a second…When the Perfect Idol gets out of her powered suit…Ohh! Those tits!”

“Wait, what!? What are you talking about!? Did it come with an attachment!?”

Heivia suddenly turned his attention towards the device, but then some new explosions occurred in midair. The two boys ducked down and checked on the situation from next to the pile of trash.

The soldiers of the naval base had recovered from the first wave of attacks. The remaining anti-air weapons began firing back at the Apoptosis UAVs with missiles and autocannon fire.

They were helped by the fact that the UAVs were equipped with propeller engines that focused on flight time rather than jet engines that focused on speed.

The UAVs were too slow in taking evasive actions. The blasts and fragments from a surface-to-air missile ate into one UAV’s main wings and body. The Apoptosis lost its balance and crashed into the

middle of the naval base while trailing black smoke.

“Oh!”

“Idiot!! This is where things get bad!!’

Quenser had started to poke his head out from behind the pile of trash, but Heivia grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him back.

In the next moment, a brilliant flash of light and deafening explosive roar swept over the area.

The pile of trash turned into a black silhouette and everything else was dyed white.

A stinging pain spread across all of their skin as if they had sat right next to a heater for a long period of time.

Quenser tried to take in a breath, but Heivia covered his mouth.

If he had breathed in, the inside of his body could have been horribly burned.

After a few dozen seconds had passed, Quenser was finally allowed to breathe once more.

“What…? What the hell was that!?”

“It’s the same principle as a thermobaric bomb. They’re unmanned attack crafts, remember? When they are unable to continue flying, they chemically scatter their fuel around the nearby area and then ignite it. That way, they can take out the enemy craft that shot them down or do damage to a target facility on the ground. That’s the reason the UAVs are named after a form of suicide.”

“A thermobaric bomb? Then shouldn’t we have ended up as a part of the pile of trash?”

“They aren’t using a combustion agent meant for bombs. All they do is scatter their leftover fuel. At best, its range is about 200 meters around them, but the power goes down depending on how much they have left in their tank.”

“Not good… The remaining UAVs are falling towards the naval base!”

“I guess that first one was enough to take out the rest of the Apoptosis UAVs. Don’t go out from behind cover! Get down and hold your breath!!”

Seven more impromptu thermobaric bombs were set off.

The pure white explosions robbed the naval base of all of its primary functions.

Quenser was thrown into a vortex of explosive roars. He felt a pain like he had been stuffed inside a metal drum that was then beat from the outside with metal bats. For a while, he was not even sure if he was lying face down or face up.

“I’m gonna die…I’m really gonna die, dammit! Why haven’t I died yet after all this!? I’m fucking amazing!!”

“Don’t get too excited, lucky boy. There’s more coming!!”

Quenser heard the sound of rifles being fired. Quenser wondered why they would be firing since all of the Apoptosis UAVs had detonated, but that was not the target.

On the southern side of the naval base, a few dozen men in military uniforms were walking over the fence that had been knocked down in the repeated explosions. They were charging into the naval base.

The machine guns on armored vehicles with all their wheels destroyed and other weapons were being used in an attempt to drive back those enemy soldiers, but it was unclear how long that would last.

And the request for backup came over the radio just as Quenser had expected.

It was from the Latin soldier from before.

“We must stop the enemy soldiers from infiltrating from the south. All soldiers able are to find a firearm and gather there! The third

armory is half destroyed, but its contents are still usable!!”

“Is the only thing he’s good at forcing others to clean up shit? What should we do, Heivia!?”

“Leave him be. I’m not gonna listen to the selfish demands of some honor student.”

Quenser stopped moving when he heard that response.

He blinked a few times and asked again.

“…Seriously? You’re going to let him die because he treated us unfairly?”

“That’s not what I’m doing. What proof do we have that there are no more Apoptosis UAVs? Look to the north and west. Something like contrails are heading straight up from the ground about 500 meters away. Those are from the boosters that launch the Apoptosis UAVs vertically. If we don’t take care of those launchers, a second wave will be set up. If they’re launched, the naval base won’t last.” Heivia pointed alternatively at the contrails in two different directions. “This port is a military facility. It has a lot of underground areas protected by thick concrete. There won’t be as many casualties as the visual damage suggests. But those areas aren’t absolutely safe. If those thermobaric bombs attack again and again, the survivors will be buried under rubble.”

“…Should we head to the north or the west?”

“It’s the same either way. Come with me.”

Heivia tossed Quenser the military handgun he used as a sidearm and they began their attack with the west.

Five hundred meters was in range of an assault rifle, but the path there was too cluttered. It had apparently originally been a road with a tidy row of office buildings, but so many barracks had been added that they covered up both the sidewalk and road. Plus, the various piles of trash filled the narrow path further. Only a small path remained. There was too much blocking the line of fire.

“Let’s head forward alongside all these piles of trash. If we run into enemy soldiers, they’ll be able to fire through the barracks.”

It seemed ridiculous to think of trash as tougher than building walls, but it was the truth.

“So who do you think this enemy is? The Faith Organization?”

“I said the Apoptosis UAVs were sold to acquire foreign currency, remember? There’s no way to know at this stage. This is the Amazon district after all. If you head north up the ocean, you find yourself at the home countries of the Information Alliance and the Capitalist Corporations. This is an important place because it acts as a relay base for Objects. There are plenty of places that want to attack it.”

But there was no way to hide the launchers.

After all, the UAVs had to be launched into the sky like rockets. They might have been able to hide them before firing, but there was nothing they could do afterwards. Most of the attention had turned in the direction of the explosions in the naval base, but a few of the waves of confusion had turned in the direction of the launchers. Several gazes mixed in with the panicked and fleeing people had turned towards the launchers as if surrounding them from afar.

“That’s it,” said Heivia once they had approached to 200 meters away. “They’ve forcibly attached a launcher onto the back of that large truck. That thing held by the crane is a set of four Apoptosis UAVs. It can be hard to tell with their wings folded up like that.”

“Let’s finish this before they can set them up. How many enemies are there?”

“Ten from what I can see. And there might be some more mixed in with the crowd over-…”

Before Heivia could finish speaking, the two boys heard a small metallic noise.

It was the sound of a man in a military uniform hiding behind a barracks 5 meters away switching off the safety on his submachine

gun.

“!?”

Quenser immediately tried to bring up the military handgun he was not used to using, but Heivia moved more quickly. He pulled out the large knife on his waist and threw it.

The large blade stabbed deeply into the man’s throat and he collapsed to the ground without being able to cry out properly.

Heivia approached the corpse to retrieve the knife.

“Don’t make any noise, idiot. We can be flashier once we get another 50 meters closer.”

“…Did they teach you that at military school?”

“No, you can’t always follow the textbooks. When it’s this heavy, you have to use it like a throwing axe. Otherwise the rotation of the blade stabilizes it and it won’t stab in very well.”

Another enemy soldier spotted them while Heivia got carried away with his commentary.

The two idiots frantically dove behind a pile of trash just as the first gunshot rang out. The tremendous noise of other guns firing joined in afterwards.

“I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die!!”

“Actually, it is strange we’re still alive with how much they’re shooting! Are they even aiming!? Don’t tell me they’re just panicking!”

But no matter the intention behind it, a fired bullet was still deadly. And they were at an overwhelming disadvantage when it came to numbers. Just poking their heads out from behind cover could easily get them killed by a storm of bullets.

“They stink of amateurs. What should we do, Quenser!?”

“I’m an amateur too, so don’t ask me! By the way, do you think all the people of the city have escaped yet?”

“This is a battlefield country. They’ll definitely have enough crisis management ability to run away when they hear this much gunfire!!”

“Then take out your shoulder-fired anti-tank missile.” Quenser tapped Heivia’s shoulder to gather his attention and then pointed at the distant launcher vehicle. “Shoot the Apoptosis UAVs still hanging from that crane. They’re filled with jet fuel, right? That’ll blow all these soldiers away.”

“That’s just wrong.”

“They’re the ones that attacked our base using that. They can’t complain.”

Heivia removed the safety pin from the missile hanging from his shoulder while Quenser tried to provide covering fire with the military handgun he held in both hands.

But he clearly failed.

“Ow!? That almost ripped my wrists off! Why do you use such a pointlessly huge handgun!? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of a sidearm!?”

“It’s 50 caliber. A man’s gotta have a big gun!”

“Not even a human skull is this hard…”

“Outta the way. The missile’s ready! It’s time for a fun campfire!!”

“Kyahh! You’re so cool, Heivia!!”

“Time to dance, you assholes!!”

With the missile launcher resting on his shoulder, Heivia used the sensors to aim and unhesitatingly pulled the trigger.

It launched with a sound more like compressed gas being released

than an explosion.

It shot down the narrow path between barracks, passed straight over the launcher vehicle, and struck the set of four Apoptosis UAVs hanging down from the crane.

The explosive roar disappeared.

It was blotted out by the flash of light.

Quenser and Heivia were knocked over backwards by the side effects of the explosion they themselves had created and the pile of trash they had been using as a shield began to crumble. They frantically rolled out of the way, but then the wall of one of the worn-down barracks began falling towards them.

“Why is it that I’m not expecting to get any praise for this victory!?”

“Just be grateful we won!!”

The diagonal barracks wall got caught on the barracks on the opposite side of the narrow road. The two idiots crawled through the gap this left and somehow managed to survive unscathed.

“Quenser, Quenser. Get your handgun ready!”

“?”

“Most of them were turned into pillars of fire, but the survivors have begun to retreat. If we don’t take at least a few of them alive, we won’t know who’s behind this!!”

“Then you focus on that, Heivia!”

“What are you gonna do!?”

“Look. There are still a few sets of four Apoptosis UAVs left. There’s another launcher up north, right? Let’s fire them and bomb the other launcher. If we don’t, the naval base is done for!!”

Part 4

Sogia of Unicorn checked on the situation with binoculars while intercepting the cheap radio encryption the local terrorist group was using.

He scratched at the scar encircling his neck.

“What’s going on?”

“The western launcher is almost entirely taken out. The northern one is currently being bombed by a stolen Apoptosis,” replied Sanya. “The ones who charged into the naval base are being pushed back due to air support being so late. A lot of the terrorist group’s remaining force has given up and started to retreat.”

“What are they using for a vehicle?”

“When the one they came here on was destroyed, I told them to use the one we had hidden. The vehicle has a bomb underneath and the fuel tank has also been rigged in case the bomb does not go off.”

“Ugh,” said Mars in displeasure.

Sogia ignored him and said, “We have no more need of the terrorist group, so take care of them. And do it once they’ve gotten onto a main road and are unlikely to get out of the vehicle.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” said Sanya in a mocking manner as she checked the location of the GPS tracking device on her tablet device.

As Sanya took human lives with a single finger, Flat let out a timid voice.

“Will the lieutenant general be happy about this?”

“He’ll make sure he looks troubled by it. But he’ll definitely be smiling inwardly. He is the kind of villain that joins hands with Unicorn after all,” replied Sogia offhandedly before pointing his thick finger at Mars. “Now, it’s time to get to work. If things are

going as planned, the pumpkin carriage's route will change. We're about to get very busy. We all need to work hard to make up for Sanya who is busy cleaning up trash."

Part 5

“Hey, baby. How long are you going to keep crying? It’s about time you smiled.”

The one who had told her that was gone.

The owner of the unrefined hand that had rubbed her head was gone.

Yulenzak had been lost in a South American desert along with many other soldiers.

And she had stopped hoping for anything from anyone else.

That was why she had prepared herself somewhere inside for this to happen.

“Our route has changed,” said the female servant in a maid uniform driving the high class vehicle.

With no change of expression, the girl of about 14 asked, “Why?”

“Additional risks to your safety necessitated the change.”

From what she had heard, it was only another 10 minutes to the nearest military facility. She had only been able to somehow withstand the hellish flight because the goal was so close. But once it came down to it, this happened. The safe zone had been stolen from right before her eyes. She had no idea if her life would last long enough to reach the next goal point. In fact, she had no idea if that goal would be safe even if she could reach it.

She had originally been protected by a large scale convoy, but now this one vehicle was all that remained.

This was not because their numbers had been worn down by external enemy attacks.

As if it had been arranged ahead of time, the soldiers who were

supposed to protect her had begun attacking her. If the high class vehicle had not been bulletproof, it would have been turned to Swiss cheese and burst into flames.

When she thought about it, she had been wrapped up in all sorts of political strife in the past as well.

But this was different. It had long since crossed a certain line. There was likely no hope for her. Her heart had been completely hardened by the malice sprayed at it 24/7, so she was horribly calm as she predicted that truth.

After breathing a quiet sigh, she said, “You do not need to stay with me any longer. You may leave if you wish.”

“I am doing this because I wish to. I am not being coerced into it.”

“Then I command you: leave me.”

“Then I will be forced to ensure your survival to atone for the crime of disobeying you.”

A shadow shot by above the high class vehicle.

In the next instant, something long and narrow stabbed into a building in front of them and the wall exploded. It was an air-to-surface missile fired by a UAV. When she saw large quantities of rubble pouring down, the maid frantically hit the brakes. The black vehicle slid to a stop just in front of the pile of rubble. A second wave of falling rubble spread out as if chasing the vehicle which backed up quickly enough for the tires to screech.

The hurried backing up caused the back of the high class vehicle to slam into a streetlight.

The maid unlocked the back door and jumped out of the driver’s seat. She opened the back door and dragged out the girl.

“An automobile cannot outrun air-to-surface missiles. We must head through the narrow alleyways on foot!”

The girl moved her feet while being pulled by the hand, but she had

a guess where they were headed.

They were being guided.

The naval port they had been headed to before the change of route had been their final safe area. Now that they could no longer use it, their possible goal points were limited.

This was the moment.

She could not keep the maid involved any longer. There was no point in it.

So she said, “I can manage on my own from here on out. You flee on your own.”

“Do not be silly.”

“Then let me ask: where are we headed?”

The maid did not reply.

A slight bit more strength entered the hand holding the girl’s hand.

“By any chance is it the Lexpop rental float…or rather, its ruins?”

“…”

“We are simply being led along the route they want. In that case, there is no need for you to go to so much effort. Even if I am alone, I will be led along the same route.”

“…Even so, it is my pride to protect the royal bloodline.”

There had been a time when the girl had been given hope by such comments.

She had depended on them, snuggled up to them, and trusted in them.

But then the White Bears of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s 115th Private Royal Guard Company had been wiped out.

Those vulgar jokes…

And that large hand that had rubbed her head…

They had all disappeared. It had been such a disaster that the bodies were completely unrecoverable.

It was only after it was all over that the girl had learned that they had thrown themselves into such danger again and again to protect her from all sorts of political strife.

And…

The girl had given up on having hope in anyone or anything.

She felt she had no other choice.

Part 6

The mopping up of the terrorists was mostly complete, so Quenser tossed aside the tablet device he had used to control the Apoptosis UAV.

Heivia was returning from a distance.

For some reason, he was covered in mud.

“Did you have a sports festival or something?”

“I had no luck. I was chasing after the fleeing terrorists’ vehicle, but it suddenly blew up. The others in the group might have been cutting their losses like a lizard’s tail.”

“Well, that was blatant.”

“Yeah, it was like the whole thing was plastered with stickers announcing their group was backed by someone else.”

However, it was not Quenser and Heivia’s job to sit in the strategy room and push pieces across a large map. They were curious about the identity and scale of their opponent, but it was nothing more than curiosity. Whoever their enemy might be, what they had to do was the same.

In other words…

“Well, we finished blowing up the terrorists. Now we have nothing to do.”

“You’re saying we should head back to all the honor students in that naval base? And end up running around in pace with all of them? I don’t think so. This confusion will keep them from confirming things are safe at least for a while. Since we’re out here in the market, how about we get something to eat at a stand?”

“Things aren’t exactly calm here either. There was that firefight and explosion, remember? All of the townspeople are gone.”

“We can just leave the money on the counter.”

“What’s the traditional food in the Amazon district?’

“It’ll at least be something we can eat. It won’t violate the Washington Convention.”

After saying that, the two cowards decide not to be adventurous and bought (without permission) some fried chicken they could have gotten anywhere. As he tore into the chicken while leaning against the stand made from a small modified truck, Quenser finally felt his stiffened cheek returning to normal.

“Ahh, ahh. Cheap food like this is so damn good. We really are gourmets.”

“Hey, Quenser, can we drink 0% beer while on duty? It doesn’t have any alcohol.”

“We’re already breaking regulations with this fried chicken.”

As they chatted, an annoying voice came in over their radios.

“All available soldiers are to head to runway 3. We will reorganize the units. All who are not injured or aiding the injured are to hurry to runway 3!”

“It’s that Latin guy again.”

“So that grades-obsessed bastard survived. Maybe we should have used the confusion to fire a bullet towards the naval base too.”

What they were saying was horrible, but it was nothing but talk. The ones who had actually silently fired at their own side during the attack had been the men from the naval base. That would normally warrant a court martial, but there would be no proper witnesses due to the confusion and the others from the base would likely cover for their comrades.

“Lieutenant Colonel Camellia is injured, but I have instructions from her. A yellow label is underway here. I repeat, a yellow label. Normally, only officers have clearance to know this, but the only

way to continue the mission is to reveal it," continued the transmission.

"What's a yellow label?" asked Quenser.

"A real bitch of a job," replied Heivia. "It's a mission for an embassy, consulate, or military facility to shelter a VIP who is being pursued for some reason or another."

"The transmission went on to say, "Due to the damage we have taken, we are unable to defend the VIP here. But the yellow label is still in place. We must rendezvous with the VIP and protect her as she heads to a secondary candidate for a base. Anyone who can move must work. Once the units have been reorganized, we will head out to recover the yellow label! If we allow the defenseless Staivia Nikolaschka to be abducted by local terrorists or the local mafia, our names will go down in history as the ones who let it happen!!"

"…Nikolaschka?"

A bit of seriousness mixed in with Heivia's joking tone.

Looking confused, Quenser asked, "What is it? Is it a name you recognize from your noble evening parties?"

"You idiot! This goes higher than that. She's way higher than me! Nikolaschka is the royal family of the Volga district! Staivia is the youngest princess, but she's said to be one of the most influential candidates in the conflict over who inherits the throne. Normally, she would be surrounded by bodyguards every moment of her life! In the Volga district, the next heir is decided 30 years after the queen's enthronement, so this is when her value is at its highest!!"

"Is she a beautiful woman?"

"Given her age, you'd have to call her a beautiful girl."

And that was enough to give them motivation.

Quenser casually tossed aside the bone to his fried chicken and restarted the conversation.

“So the naval base was attacked to alter the route of this sheltered Staivia girl?”

“Looks that way. Whoever it was using those terrorists as disposable pawns is probably planning to try something along this new route of hers, don’t you think?”

They had no idea why one of the royals who stood at the top of the Legitimacy Kingdom would be wandering around this area, but it would be a once-in-a-lifetime chance for those who wanted to use her. There would be plenty of people wanting to abduct her for the sake of money even if they had no direct grudge against her.

…Or so it seemed.

“Hey, what do you even do if you abduct a royal?” asked Quenser, a commoner, with a frown. “It’s just too rare a situation. It would be like when people steal a Van Gogh or Picasso and have trouble selling it afterwards, right? And if they tried to make threats while using the princess as a shield, it would be dealt as a threat to the dignity of the royal family and the Legitimacy Kingdom as a whole, right? A power on an entirely different dimension from family bonds would make her family try to slaughter all of the abductors even if it meant sacrificing the princess. …Her family would be looked down on otherwise. It could act as a spark that incites conflict among the influential royals.”

In the Legitimacy Kingdom, the purpose of abductions was usually to get at the wealth of commoners. If someone noble was abducted, the abductor would meet overwhelming resistance thanks to the noble’s money, influence, and connections. And if someone went after a royal that was even higher than a noble, they would lose any chance to turn back.

Even if they fled to another world power like the Information Alliance or Capitalist Corporations, various diplomatic methods would be used to have them sent back to the Legitimacy Kingdom. And if those failed, an assassination team would be sent in.

As a noble, Heivia was more familiar with all that than Quenser who was only a commoner, but Heivia shook his head.

“The situation is different for Staivia Nikolaschka.”

“?”

“The Volga district is in the top 10 of Eastern Europe when it comes to issues regarding the heir to the throne. It wouldn’t be surprising if the faction supporting her opposing candidate or a force wanting to sell her to that faction is trying to crush Staivia.”

“…Is it really bad enough to warrant military involvement?”

“The other candidate has a reason to rush things. According to rumor at least.” Heivia leaned up against the wall of the fried chicken stand. “Dimiksy Nikolaschka. He’s over 30. If you just go to any salon, you can hear more rumors than you want about how he’s killed at least two other candidates. Then again, Dimiksy is at the top of the list due to his age. And not just compared to Staivia. He’s the oldest of any of the candidates.”

“Then wouldn’t Dimiksy be first in line for the throne? I guess I have heard of the order getting changed if the primary candidate has a congenital disease or is likely to die before too long.”

It was not rare for the rights of the one who stood at the top of a nation to be taken away by a third party if their ability to rule was threatened by physical or mental issues.

And since the Legitimacy Kingdom gave bloodline more weight than anything, they had a custom of avoiding adding any genetic risks into the royal bloodline.

But…

“Dimiksy Nikolaschka’s issue is nothing on that level.”

“Then why change the order of succession? If he has to get rid of several other candidates, he must have ended up fairly low on the list.”

“The Volga district’s queen is said to be wise, talented, and skilled at both military and political matters, but she does have her faults. That queen is known as the Goddess of Moscow, but her ability to

choose men is bad enough to go down in history.”

“…So her husband cheated on her?”

“Officially, Dimiksy was said to be birthed by a surrogate mother, but the theory that he is a bastard child from a mistress is pretty likely. One writer who tried to investigate it ended up drowned in a river. In the Legitimacy Kingdom, bloodline is everything. The royal bloodline of the Volga district comes from the queen. If Dimiksy really is a bastard, it means he does not contain a single drop of royal blood.”

If that was true, Dimiksy Nikolaschka would not just be low on the order of succession, but he would have no right to the throne at all.

If he still planned to inherit the throne of the Volga district, the options left to him were limited.

He had to murder all of the other candidates.

The suspicion was a problem, but it was better than having the royal bloodline come to an end. No matter how suspect Dimiksy might be, those around him would be forced to give him the throne.

“But the Legitimacy Kingdom has the Lineage Department, right? When he inherits the throne, they’ll definitely do a DNA test. No matter what Dimiksy does, he’s done for as soon as his DNA doesn’t match up, right?”

“If the Lineage Department does its job properly,” replied Heivia so quickly and readily that he had to have been expecting that question. “The Lineage Department is officially cut off from politics. Otherwise, nobles and royals would be unable to use them to

mediate family turmoil. …But the top executives in the Lineage Department are filled with people from the tutoring organization that works for the royal families. In other words, they were given their jobs there."

"You don't mean…"

"A royal will give a group of several dozen tutors to a single child. And for a few years now, the top executive positions have been filled one after another with people with a connection to Dimiksy. He has a majority. It wouldn't be hard for him to have a record or two swapped out."

Dimiksy Nikolaschka was suspected to be attempting to take the throne of the Volga district on false pretenses.

It was possible he was trying to drive the proper heir, Staivia, off of the stage so that he could fulfill that ambition.

Which meant the purpose behind Dimiksy's faction using terrorists to attack the naval base to alter Princess Staivia's escape route was not to abduct her. It was to assassinate her.

"That's horrible. The family has so much power and yet they start killing each other."

"What are you saying? It's just your standard fight over inheritance."

"…Oh, I see. So nobles are insane, too. We commoners will never understand any of this," spat out Quenser offhandedly. "But this is a conflict between royals, right? Wouldn't a clash between their direct royal guard units be enough to cause a war? And if they use their political power, they can probably get Objects brought in…"

"Staivia is a solitary princess. Unlike the other royals, she does not have a direct royal guard unit. Although it seems she used to."

"…?"

"The Legitimacy Kingdom's 115th Private Royal Guard Company. Also known as the White Bears. They were the unit that acted as the

princess's shield. Three years ago, they were wiped out in a surprise attack by the Information Alliance during a military exercise. …And it seems they were forced to take part in that military exercise. I've heard talk that Dimiksy's faction was behind it."

"In other words, there's no proof the soldiers wearing Information Alliance uniforms were actually from the Information Alliance, hm?"

If someone was killed in a safe country, it was a major incident. But things were different in a battlefield country. Even if 100 or 200 people were killed, it would be compressed to nothing more than a small article crammed into the corner of the newspaper. …After all, this was an age when small-scale wars were constantly occurring all over the world.

That had been a careful slaughter carried out simply to wear down the power of a political enemy.

"And rumor has it a newly formed unit began hanging around Dimiksy at the same time. Supposedly they passed some entrance exam and succeeded in gaining Dimiksy's favor. But…" Heivia used his thumb to make a slicing gesture across his throat. "That unit was the 202nd Mobile Support Company…aka Unicorn. And that's the deed that towers above all the other horrible things they're rumored to have done."

Part 7

“I hate this feeling,” muttered Sogia, the large man from Unicorn, as he lit the cigar in his mouth while standing at an elevated area a slight distance from the village. “I hate this damp feeling. It reminds me of a desert oasis.”

Hearing that, a cynical smile appeared on the face of Sanya, the female member, as she leaned up against the back of the truck.

“No matter what it reminded you of, it would leave a bad taste in your mouth, right?”

“I suppose that’s true.”

The young man named Mars who had been monitoring the intercepted radio transmissions suddenly called out to Sogia.

“Not good, not good. The naval base is getting back on its feet quicker than expected. If they reorganize their units this quickly, the base could regain functionality. And if the base is able to take care of the yellow label here, the ‘little bird’ we took so much effort to send the other way will turn back and enter its cage here.”

“Wh-what should we do?” asked Flat hesitantly.

Mars pointed at the back of the truck Sanya was leaning up against.

“How about we use her collection? If we put on Information Alliance or Faith Organization uniforms and fire a rocket, we can take them all out at once. They’re all lined up on an open runway to confirm who’s survived.”

Sanya was jokingly called a cosplay enthusiast. She collected uniforms and equipment of the main world powers of the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization and even of local guerrillas and terrorists.

Unicorn would wear multiple uniforms on the same battlefield and carry out subversive activities to spread great confusion through the

battlefield. They would wear Information Alliance uniforms and attack a Capitalist Corporations unit. Before the blood had even dried, they would change into Capitalist Corporations uniforms and attack a Faith Organization unit. They would send out a Faith Organization SOS signal, slaughter the recovery unit that arrived, and use the unit's transport helicopter to safely escape the battlefield.

For a small number of elite soldiers to interfere with the great flow of a war and yet safely survive, dirty methods were needed to fill the gap in military strength that could never be overcome with standard methods. And of course, those sorts of methods were Unicorn's specialty.

But…

"That kind of defeats the purpose of using the local terrorists in the first place. The first shot might be a success, but if the battle continued, we would be outnumbered. With that many in this situation, just the four of us isn't enough," said Sogia casually while he puffed out some smoke. "Really, we don't need to think about this too much. Their attempt to reorganize will definitely fail. Even if they gather up personnel and weapons, they'll get into an argument over who takes command with all of their higher ranking officers dead. …There are different factions even in a single unit. Even if they all know they need to hurry, human greed cannot be completely eliminated."

While still leaning against the back of the truck, Sanya glared at Mars.

She quickly said, "Damn newcomer."

"Can you please stop treating me like a newcomer!? It's been 3 years since I joined the unit!"

"You'll continue being a rookie for as many years as it takes for you to finally start learning from your mistakes, Mars. Oh, and Sanya, bring out the uniforms in your collection for Flightburg Air Force Base."

“Flightburg?”

Mars frowned, but Sogia grabbed his lit cigar between his fingers and pointed up into the air with the glowing orange tip.

“We have a black high class vehicle of our own coming to pick us up. We need to make sure we don’t violate the dress code.”

A jet black transport helicopter designed with stealth in mind was approaching. The specific model was used to airdrop paid killers more often than it was to transport cargo. The large craft with two rotors began flying in a light circle around Sogia and the others. Once it detected the ultraviolet marker Flat had set up, it slowly descended.

An older man wearing sunglasses and a deep gray beret stepped off of the helicopter while protected by several bodyguards. His rank was colonel, but he had fewer medals on his chest than the average for that rank.

Sogia saluted, but it seemed like he was mocking the man since the cigar was still in his mouth.

“Hey there, Colonel Marechiare. I didn’t expect someone of your standing to come out to greet us.”

“Do you mind if I take one?”

“As long as you’re fine with the cheap cigars of unknown make you can find all over the marketplace.”

“I’m in the mood for some cheap drinks.”

Sogia handed Marechiare a cigar and the older man held it between his teeth and between his index finger and middle finger. One of Marechiare’s bodyguards held a light out for the colonel before Sogia could hold out his own lighter.

Marechiare lightly puffed on the cigar and the wrinkles on his face increased.

Sogia calmly said, “I told you.”

“I have received word that the damage at the naval base has exceeded a certain level. The destination for Princess Staivia’s yellow label has been changed.”

“Of course, even if the attack had failed and the princess made it to the naval base, the upper levels of the base had already been bought off, right?”

“Yes, but that bribery was only carried out 2 months ago. It was too uncertain. There was always a risk they would betray us at the last second. Changing the yellow label as planned is much easier.”

Naturally, the upper levels of the base they had treated as “allies” had been kept in the dark that they would be attacked.

That point alone suggested Colonel Marechiare’s character was just as rotten as Unicorn’s. And the members of Unicorn were rotten enough that they were unfazed by something of that level.

“Now that we have moved to the next phase, I wish to move you to our hideout. Are you prepared?”

“We’re about to change. We can leave as soon as that’s done. We’d stand out if we were walking around Flightburg Air Force Base still dressed as Unicorn, right? …Oh, and this truck is our own. Can you carry it down below the helicopter?”

“It’s small enough to fit inside the helicopter.”

The four members of Unicorn changed into new military uniforms and boarded the large transport helicopter.

After the helicopter had taken off…and so there was zero chance of being overheard, Colonel Marechiare opened his mouth to speak.

“…The plan for the Royal Duel is finally complete.”

“Who are we sending out?”

“Prince Dimiksy himself. We can’t have the pilot Elite being unreasonable and refusing to shoot Princess Staivia at the last second.”

Sogia looked slightly surprised to hear that.

“Even if this place is relatively stable, it’s still a battlefield country. If that got out, it could inspire an attack.”

“The prince is in the safest place in the Amazon district, so do not worry. This is set up so some smelly bomb made of manure cannot do anything.”

“I see,” muttered Sogia.

The prince was likely holed up in a cutting edge Object.

“Then all we have to do now is watch the rest unfold.”

“Yes, even if we have no particular grudge against the princess.”

Sogia grinned at Marechiare’s words.

Dimiksy Nikolaschka had many allies. But that was not because of his own personal virtues. The reasons people supported influential people were the same as they had always been.

It was always about how easy they were to use.

Prince Dimiksy was as horrible a person as the rumors said, but his interests were clear and that made him easy to control. If Dimiksy’s surroundings were set up to make him think he himself chose a course of action based on his observations of his surroundings, he could be easily manipulated and controlled.

On the other hand, Princess Staivia was an unknown factor. Some thought she would be easier to control due to her young age, but there was a risk of that same young age could mean a sense of justice or simplified view of the world would make her ignore what was best for herself and therefore cause all control of her to be lost.

And so people had taken action to kill the pure and innocent Snow White and to decorate the dark prince on his white horse.

“You certainly have taken a lot of risks. Does the rank of general really look that bright in your eyes, colonel?”

“The same goes for you. I have difficulty understanding how all this money and killing could be for the sake of spreading your connections.”

The large transport helicopter quietly headed towards Flightburg Air Force Base.

Those conspirators kept it all contained.

They used the people’s tax money to hide the evidence of their conspiracy.

Part 8

Quenser and Heivia quickly gave up on the idea of regrouping with the survivors from the naval base.

Just from what they could overhear from the complicated radio transmissions told them those at the base were arguing over who got control. Since they were glaring at each other while sorting through manuals in search of some kind of loophole, it seemed they had no idea just how urgent the situation was.

“It sounds like those honor students could start shooting each other at any time. If we get too close, we’d just get lined up with the rest of them and stuck there.”

“But without the official information they have, we don’t know what route Princess Staivia is using to escape. It’s top secret. I doubt it’s been made viewable on standard military terminals.”

“We need to think. Let’s reason through this, Quenser.” Heivia called up a map of the area on his handheld device. “Even if it’s relatively stable, this is still a battlefield country. If they learn a legit princess is wandering around here, the Information Alliance or the Faith Organization will abandon whatever mission they’re on and rush here. Once it was clear the princess couldn’t use the naval base, she would start heading on the quickest route to their second option. She’s probably headed to the next closest Legitimacy Kingdom military facility, don’t you think?”

“But the next closest one is 200 kilometers away. Do you really think they would head straight there in a normal vehicle that isn’t even bulletproof?”

“This map only shows the facilities that are in active use. But the princess needs to reach safety as quickly as possible. In that case, it’s entirely possible she would try to flee to a facility that had been abandoned but is durable.”

Heivia changed a setting and a new marker was added to the map.

It was a facility along the ocean just like the naval base.

“The ruins of Lexpop International Airport. It’s all that remains of the rental float policy that was so popular a few years back.”

“…That was a means for safe countries to support battlefield countries, right? If they simply sent money, it would go straight into the pockets of government officials, so they put international airports and all the infrastructure required such as water and sewage pipes and power generation onto giant floats which were rented out.”

“Lexpop International Airport was a rental float from the Legitimacy Kingdom. Officially, it was a civilian airport, but it actually doubled as an Object maintenance facility. The local guerrillas took issue with that and used torpedoes to blow up the ships that towed it. The rental float was then unable to lower its speed, so it slammed into the coast and flooded.”

“How sturdy is it?”

“It was designed to be used to aid Objects, so the float itself is quite tough. If the emergency power source within is activated, it’s possible its salt-resistant and highly durable anti-air defense system could be reactivated.”

The ruins of Lexpop International Airport were 80 kilometers south of the airport that had been attacked. Heivia pulled a small motorcycle out of a pile of trash and used a screwdriver to force open the ignition and start the engine.

As he climbed on the back, Quenser asked a question of his partner.

“Do you think we’ll find them on the way there?”

“Who knows. And Princess Staivia’s side has to be aware they have enemies in the Legitimacy Kingdom. If delinquent soldiers like us carelessly approach them, we might get filled with bullet holes.”

“…I’d prefer to receive a counterattack from that princess that involves hitting people with stuffed animals.”

Heivia headed full speed down the shortest route to the ruins of Lexpop International Airport. That was the route Princess Staivia's group would likely be taking, but they did not run across any such convoy on the way there.

In fact…

"What the hell? Not only is there no sign of the princess, but there aren't any traps or troops from Dimiksy's faction waiting to assassinate her. If they had blocked off all routes to the float, we should have run across some kind of barricade…"

"That means… This is bad. They must want Princess Staivia to head to the ruins of Lexpop International Airport. If there's a trap, it's the float itself! Has this rumored princess already gone inside!?"

Heivia stopped the small motorcycle near the ruins of Lexpop International Airport. A portion of the gently curving concrete embankment had been broken by the impact from the square float. The float had been dented a bit and it was tilted in the direction of one of its four corners, but it did not appear to be badly damaged. …The tilt would prevent it from functioning as an airport, though.

It was called a manmade float, but it carried all the functionality of an airport. Naturally, it was quite large. The sight of a piece of land 3 kilometers square floating in the ocean was quite bizarre.

"? Heivia, why did you stop the bike? We need to hurry up and meet up with Princess Staivia."

"Were you even listening to what I said? Lexpop International Airport is officially a civilian airport, but it can also perform maintenance on Objects. And that means…"

The situation changed before Heivia could finish his explanation.

Several large tiltrotor transport aircrafts passed by overhead. The model could of course carry troops, but it could also carry light tanks.

It was a Legitimacy Kingdom model, but that hardly put Quenser's mind at ease. Dimiksy's faction that was targeting Princess Staivia's life was part of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

Quenser used a pair of binoculars to monitor the body of the tiltrotor crafts.

"Those are ID numbers from the naval base. Are the arguments between factions already over? I guess those honor students wanted to protect Princess Staivia after all."

"Dammit! This is no time to be stupid, Quenser. We need to get going!! We need to save the Sleeping Beauty trapped in that castle!!"

"Why? If a large unit of those honor students are on their way to save her…"

Quenser's voice was cut off by an explosive noise.

An orange flash of light ripped through the sky and an impact like a giant drum being struck weighed on the two idiots' stomachs. Quenser immediately lowered himself to the ground as he watched one of the tiltrotor crafts explode in midair and spread black smoke and wreckage everywhere.

"They were shot!? That came from the ruins of the airport! They're firing missiles and Gatling guns like crazy!!"

"I said the anti-air weapons could be reactivated if the emergency power supply was activated, remember!? They'll just be shot down like this. Every one of those flying treasure chests will be gambled away!!"

Some of those from the naval base took action to avoid being foolishly blown to pieces aboard those slow cargo planes. Even from where he was, Quenser could see the cargo hatches opening and soldiers, airmobile tanks, and armored vehicles being forced out.

But if one ignored war treaties, a parachute was just a nice target.

The Gatling gun's tracer bullets mercilessly attacked a portion of the

humans and armored weapons that's speed had quickly dropped.

"What? They're shooting the allies that are here to help! Is this rumored Sleeping Beauty such a bad sleeper that it reaches the level of a reign of terror!? I mean, I understand the desire to shoot those honor students when you see those smug grins, but still!"

"No, Quenser. Something isn't right. I've been trying to contact them by radio for a while now, but every frequency I try has too much noise on it. Someone is jamming us. It's like they're trying to hide the true intentions of the princess."

"You mean Dimiksy's faction set up the emergency power and anti-air weapons ahead of time to isolate Princess Staivia?"

"If those weapons are on auto-intercept mode, they'll act regardless of the princess's wishes. All of this friendly fire is going to be blamed on her! We need to hurry up and sneak onto the airport float and shut down the emergency power. Otherwise, all of those disagreeable honor students will be turned into bloody rain!"

If they headed through a normal route, they would be swallowed up in a storm of bullets and missiles.

Quenser and Heivia entered the ocean from the coast a short distance from the float. The area must have been developed to allow large ships to pass through because it was surprisingly deep. From what they could see, it was several dozen meters deep.

"Upph! This is absolutely disgusting! It reeks!! Do the people here think nothing of ocean resources!?"

"If they understood that, they would be able to join the other advanced nations. Dammit. I want to throw away my rifle and missile and everything. I should have prepared a float before jumping in!"

Without the aid of fins or oxygen tanks and while somehow managing to hold onto their heavy military equipment, the two idiots approached the float while half-drowning.

"Is there a secret entrance or something?"

“Don’t be stupid. We’re just going to climb up onto it. It’s the basic method.”

Luckily, it was light on sea-related defense systems such as torpedoes and anti-ship missiles. A few sea mines were floating around, but they were meant for ships, so they were big enough for Quenser and Heivia to easily avoid.

But the two of them spotted something much worse before they made it to the float.

It was directly below the float.

They saw a giant silhouette hanging down into the ocean by hundreds of metal wires.

Once he realized what it was, Quenser spoke without meaning to.

“…An Object…?”

Part 9

Its composition was simple enough.

But what was that Object doing there in the first place?

“That’s a first generation Object from the Legitimacy Kingdom. … And it’s a pretty old one. I think it’s called the Assault Signal. I’ve seen it on some military sites. It’s a different system type from the Baby Magnum, but parts of this one’s design were incorporated in its design,” said Quenser as he climbed up the wall of the giant float.

“But why is it here?”

“How should I know? It’s not like they can use it. The pilot Elite that goes with it died in a terrorist bombing five years ago. And in a safe country no less. …It’s nothing but a useless hunk of metal now, but someone must have secretly ordered it in.”

But what did anyone gain by preparing the unusable Assault Signal?

As he climbed up to the flat surface, Heivia gave his guess.

“It’s the same as when the White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company were annihilated to take away Princess Staivia’s wings.”

“…Killing even one person in a safe country is a huge incident. But killing 100 in a battlefield country only gets a small article.”

“They want to get Princess Staivia aboard that Object somehow. Succession issues can be resolved with a duel between Objects. If they do that, they can blatantly assassinate her while following the rules of a clean war. They won’t break any war treaties. The Royal Duel between Objects was just a gigantic plan to assassinate Princess Staivia.”

A sniper attack or bombing would have been easier, but if a young girl was killed as the result of a conflict over political power,

discontent would swell up within the people. In an absolute monarchy like the Legitimacy Kingdom, that was of no consequence whatsoever. However, not even a royal could take actions that the surrounding influential royals considered to be unbefitting of a head of state.

In the modern clean wars, it was rare (in the official records at least) for infantry to shed any blood, but the people were used to the pilot Elites inside Objects being sent on fights to the death.

As soon as one boarded an Object, it was assumed one was prepared for death.

And the preparations for that were complete.

“But if they eliminated an entire unit and assassinated an Elite just as preparations to legally eliminate Princess Staivia, aren’t they getting their priorities a bit backwards?”

“There are some problems you can erase and some you can’t. And you know just how big Dimiksy’s eraser is.” Heivia used his thumb to point at his chest. “In fact, my Winchell family is in the middle of some turmoil right now. Normally, they would plot some way of assassinating me while I’m wandering around in these battlefield countries. If they got their hands on a gun or bomb from an enemy nation, they could easily pull off the perfect crime. The only reason they haven’t is because I’m such a big existence that they can’t fully erase the problem with an eraser of their size.”

From the view of the commoners down at the bottom, the nobles and royals could do whatever they wanted, but Quenser guessed they must have their own issues to deal with.

And in that case…

It was only natural that…

“The Object they secretly brought in for Princess Staivia is basically a pile of scraps. They chose it so they knew they had a target they could destroy on the first shot.”

“What if the princess catches on to Dimiksy’s conspiracy and refuses

to board the Object?"

"If they used an Object to torture the flesh-and-blood princess to death, they would receive nothing but the animosity of the people. …But it's different if she has an Object but refuses to board it. People would assume she lost her nerve. And another thing. In our world, you are free to accept or decline a letter challenging you to a duel. But once you accept the duel, your social standing will drop like a rock if you don't show up. That might even get your right to life revoked."

In other words, Dimiksy's plan was almost complete by the time Princess Staivia was brought to the ruins of Lexpop International Airport.

At that point, the assassination could safely be carried out by having Dimiksy's side's Object sent out to use its great firepower to annihilate her according to the proper protocol.

What mattered was the official truth that Staivia's side had an Object and could therefore fight evenly with Dimiksy's side. Whether Princess Staivia was in a complete panic and could not move the Object in the ocean or not was not a problem.

"…This is insane."

"If we're going to do anything about this situation, we need to start by dealing with those anti-air weapons. If we knock out the emergency power, the defense system should stop!"

Another tiltrotor craft was shot down by a Gatling gun and crashed near Quenser and Heivia. They passed by the flaming wreckage and ran along the top of the float.

Perhaps because they had made their way onto the float, the radio jamming had weakened.

Someone must have been trying every frequency Dimiksy's group was not using because a female voice came in over Quenser's radio despite the fact that he had not tuned it to anything in particular.

"…This is…ksshh… I cannot control the float's defense system!

It….attacking….on its own… It is…ksshh…indiscriminately… You will be shot down at this rate!!”

“Yes, yes! Your signal isn’t reaching the air! Are you the rumored princess!? We’ve made our way onto Lexpop. We are aware that it’s all over if you board that Object due to the Royal Duel. We’re going to knock out the emergency power, so give us anyone information you have!!”

“I am a servant of the royal family. My name is Mikfa. Who are you!?”

“Someone from the Legitimacy Kingdom who is not tainted by Dimiksy’s faction. I am Heivia Winchell. If you know how to pick up information from the rumors you hear in salons, surely you know I have nothing to gain by supporting Dimiksy Nikolaschka!”

“I see. I heard you are the eccentric boy trying his hardest to act out a Shakespearean tragedy by taking the daughter of the opposing Vanderbilt family.”

“Well, right now I want to turn this into a comedy.”

This was likely something Heivia would be better suited for with his knowledge of the nobles and royals at the upper levels of the Legitimacy Kingdom. There was a power balance in play that a commoner like Quenser simply did not understand.

“I brought Lady Staivia here to Lexpop for shelter, but it seems it was a trap set up by Dimiksy’s faction. The power supply for the defense system is controlled by the members of Dimiksy’s faction that were hiding in the float! You need to destroy it!!”

“How many men does Dimiksy have here?”

“Lady Staivia and I are the only two not from his faction.”

“Well, that simplifies matters,” muttered Quenser.

As Heivia ran along the top of the float, he spoke into the radio and asked, “Where are you now?”

“I am being imprisoned near the power generation facility Dimiksy’s faction holds. I attempted to remain by Lady Staivia’s side, but it seems Dimiksy’s faction is using that as a part of their plan.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It seems they intend to use me as a hostage in order to force Lady Staivia into the Object. And unfortunately, Lady Staivia’s heart is too strongly benevolent. I am prepared to withstand torture, but Lady Staivia will not last if she is forced to watch it.”

Heivia clicked his tongue.

And then he made a completely groundless promise.

“We’ll be there in 10 minutes. Don’t you die before then.”

“I appreciate your cooperation, but please prioritize rescuing Lady Staivia and destroying the emergency power.”

Heivia switched off the radio and tossed his spare handgun to Quenser.

“It’s time to clean up the shit, Quenser! Let’s go rescue a maid as an appetizer for the princess!!”

“A maid is a wonderful thing. We need to teach these people that our country should protect maids with everything it has!”

Dimiksy’s faction seemed to be fully relying on the defense system because Quenser and Heivia ran into no interference after climbing up onto the float. Their Object would likely be attacking the float in the near future, so they must have wanted to hold it with as few men as possible to allow a speedy retreat.

They entered a terminal with all its glass shattered and ran down the stairs to reach the underground portion of the float.

“Do you think we can manage this?”

“Rescue operations aren’t my specialty, but we’ll just have to make

do with what we have on hand!”

They must have entered an area not intended for customers to see because the overall atmosphere changed as they headed down the stairs. The walls were made of exposed metal, the passageways were narrow, and numerous pipes ran along near the ceiling. Unlike the open airport, this area felt like it was inside a tanker. Oddly enough, the inability to see anything outside made the rocking of the float feel stronger.

“Even if I know how it works, it feels wrong for something this huge to be floating.”

“As long as it has air trapped inside, the size doesn’t matter.”

“Even so, it’s like styrofoam, so is it just human nature to want to build walls?”

“If the sea was stormy, it seems a large wave would break it.”

Whether it was always the case or if a mode changed when the emergency power was in use, the lighting was sparse. The only illumination came from occasional LED light bulbs, so the darkness was overwhelmingly greater than the light. As Heivia took the lead, he relied on the sensors of his assault rifle.

And after heading around a few corners, he whispered to Quenser.

“(…Shh. There’s someone in front of the door around the corner. It’s probably a guard.)”

“(Do you think you can take him out without making a noise?)”

“(I’ll try.)”

As he spoke, Heivia pulled a large knife from his waist. He was not planning to approach silently and slit the man’s throat from behind. Instead, he leaned out from the corner and forcefully threw the knife.

The knife rotated as it flew through the passageway and it smashed its way into the side of the guard’s head like an axe. He collapsed to

the side without even letting out a cry.

“You’ve used that method twice now. How about you start carrying a dedicated throwing knife?”

“The normal ones would just bounce off of a bulletproof jacket or helmet.”

Heivia headed down the passageway and pulled his own knife from the collapsed soldier’s head. Quenser pressed his ear up against the steel double doors, but he could not hear anything from inside.

As Heivia checked on the guard’s equipment, he said, “He has a handheld device. It’s showing footage from within the room.”

A small window displayed video footage of the room from an upper diagonal angle. The room was cluttered like a storage room and a single chair sat in the middle. A single girl had her arms and legs bound to the chair and two men stood on either side of her.

It looked like security camera footage, but it must have been the type that recorded sound as well.

“Now then, break time is over. It’s time to get back to business.”

“…”

“Do you know why we removed your restraints, disinfected your wounds, and are giving you bits of free time? That ensures you will not die too easily by seeing that your mind does not grow dull. And that way your suffering can last much, much longer. So prepare yourself.”

Heivia spat on the floor and said, “It looks like they’re in the middle of some fun.”

“But there’s only one girl there. I thought they were going to torture the maid while Princess Staivia watched. Where is she? Is she in the camera’s blind spot?”

“No, I’d say the reason it’s being sent live across their devices is so they can show it to the princess. In that case, Staivia might have

been brought elsewhere."

"The facility has been cut off from its surroundings via jamming. That means Princess Staivia must still be somewhere inside the float."

Then again, it was a stroke of good luck that Quenser and Heivia were able to view the situation inside before breaking in. They could check the arrangement of the room and the locations of the enemies.

"The inner walls are military stainless steel. It won't be hard to open a hole with some Hand Axe."

"The main problem is these. The powered suits." Heivia pointed at the screen. "These two have gotten out of theirs to enjoy the torture, but this one is still in his. The powered suit won't be slowed down by the shockwave when we blow through the wall. We'll be surrounded by a storm of Morning Star grenades before we take a single step inside."

"Then we just have to pay careful attention to how we knock. More importantly, can we even take out that powered suit with our firepower?"

"I could take it out with a missile, but the maid could easily get caught in the blast."

"Don't you have something a little…gentler? Do you have anything like a grenade launcher?"

"The missile's the best thing I have. I usually use these signal markers against armored weapons. They use GPS, lasers, and ultraviolet signals to send targeting information to an Object. It's easier and more of a sure thing to just have the Object send a pinpoint strike." Heivia fished through the corpse's equipment and pulled out something they might be able to use. "He's got a smoke grenade. This model has aluminum powder mixed in to take out sensors as well."

"Aluminum, hm? …Do you have a disposable heater or anything?

With some iron oxide powder, I could make thermite."

"This is a broken airport float that was left to rot. It has powdered rust everywhere."

Quenser took apart the nonlethal smoke grenade and repackaged the ingredients to create an anti-armor weapon that produced heat up to 3000 degrees.

With their cards gathered, he left the double doors and attached some Hand Axe plastic explosive to the wall.

"How are things inside?"

"They're completely focused on the maid, so they haven't noticed us. They have no idea how to properly treat a beautiful woman."

"Then let's get this over with."

Quenser and Heivia moved away from the bomb they had set. Quenser placed his thumb on the radio that would send the detonation signal.

"It's time to beg for your lives, you sadists."

Part 10

Immediately after the plastic explosive on the wall detonated, fragments, dust, and a shockwave flew into the room.

The maid and the chair she was tied to fell backwards and the two soldiers on either side of her were knocked to the floor by the shockwave. The blow to their heads threw their minds into temporary disarray.

Of those in the room, only the soldier in the powered suit remained calm.

He repeatedly fired his Morning Star grenade machine gun towards the opening created in the wall. Those explosives that spread fragments of death in a radius of around 10 meters flew out into the passageway and exploded.

But Quenser and Heivia were not there.

At the same time that the wall had been blown open, they had kicked open the double doors. The roar and shockwave of the blast had masked that simple truth. Quenser threw his makeshift thermite grenade straight for the powered suit that had immediately turned its attention toward the hole in the wall. He had used adhesive tape to make it stick.

Instead of the normal orange flames, it produced a bright white flash of light as if from welding. The distinctive smell of molten metal filled the air and the surface of the powered suit's armor melted like wax.

"Gh…gyah…!?"

A cry came from the suit's speaker, but it disappeared as the speaker stopped functioning. The powered suit collapsed to the ground and its limbs attempted to move, but the melted armor was interfering with the joints. This turned its movements into something resembling a dying caterpillar. For the same reason, the

man inside could not escape.

Meanwhile, Heivia mercilessly shot the two soldiers who had been knocked to the floor. One had his head crushed and the other received the rifle bullet to the center of his gut.

“How’s the powered suit!? Is it down for good!?”

“It’s dead all right. Even if the armor itself isn’t completely gone, the high temperature will have roasted the internal circuitry and the human flesh inside.”

A powered suit was a formidable enemy that could repel rifle bullets, but it was not invincible. That was why tanks and armored vehicles were still in use.

“Uuh…” groaned the enemy soldier who had been shot in the stomach.

Heivia silently held his assault rifle back up, but the man let out a frightened voice.

“Please help me. You’re from the Legitimacy Kingdom too, right? I was just following orders. A soldier can’t disobey his orders. I wasn’t doing this because I wanted to.”

In response, Heivia glanced at the fingers of the maid bound to the collapsed chair.

When he confirmed that they were colored red, he spoke with a cold expression on his face.

“If you were doing this reluctantly, she wouldn’t have wounds like that.”

“Wai-…”

Before the man could finish speaking, Heivia let out a short burst of gunfire. Those few shots shredded the man’s stomach and spine. There was nothing that could be done to help him now, but it would still take a few minutes before he died. That was the kind of wound it was.

Heivia mercilessly spat out the words, “Eat up, sadist.”

Meanwhile, Quenser righted the maid and her chair. He used a tool to cut the wires binding her arms and legs, but she shouted out before he could treat the wounds to her hands.

“Lady Staivia has been taken away by another unit! If you do not hurry, she will board the Object! If that happens, the preparations will be complete for the Royal Duel that Dimiksy’s faction wants!!”

“The princess was being forced to do it for your safety, right? Now that you’re free, can’t she start resisting once more?”

“No, this is bad, Quenser.”

Heivia tossed the handheld from the guard outside to Quenser.

The live footage of the room was now filled with static.

“The explosion we used to get in destroyed the camera. The rumored princess doesn’t know her maid has been rescued. They can keep coercing her!”

That was when they felt a dull rumbling.

It was not caused by a large wave. The center of gravity of the entire giant float was clearly changing.

“…The wires connected to the Object down below are being released.”

“Oh, shit. Does that mean Princess Staivia has already boarded the Object!? The Royal Duel is going to begin!!”

Part 11

Staivia sat within the cockpit of the useless first generation Object known as the Assault Signal.

It had over ten levers and hundreds of buttons. It was equipped with goggles that read the movements of one's eyes using lasers, but she had been overcome by an intense dizziness when she had tried to put them on. Someone who had not undergone any training would never be able to pilot the Object.

No…

Even if she was able to pilot it, the tremendous Gs that would produce would crush the insides of her delicate body. At any rate, the situation had been set up from the beginning so as not to give Staivia any opportunity to counterattack. The situation was the same as being stuffed inside a metal drum and used for target practice.

"The battle regulations for the Royal Duel will now be explained."

A precise female voice that almost sounded synthetic came in over the radio.

All bands were supposedly being jammed, but there seemed to be a few holes for ultrasonic waves.

"The standard regulations are the same as in the yellow manual. Area 21 of the Amazon district shall be the battle zone. To determine succession, Prince Dimiksy and Princess Staivia shall each have an Object represent them. The two Objects shall engage in battle and fight until one is unable to continue. Participation is done at one's own risk, so any injuries or deaths caused in the process are not the responsibility of the winner."

She could try to inform her maid Mikfa of this frequency. Or she could use the Object's radio to directly call for external help.

“Both forces may receive support from their own infantry and standard armored weapons. No penalties shall be made and the duel will not end until a conclusion has been reached.”

“No,” muttered Staivia.

What would change if she got through to someone? What could anyone change?

Staivia had been forced to board the Assault Signal because Mikfa, the maid who had stayed with her to the end, had been used as a hostage.

But…

Would the end result have changed if that maid had not been taken hostage?

The soldiers of Dimiksy’s faction would surely have forcibly dragged her along and thrown her into the Assault Signal’s cockpit. No matter what she did or what happened, she would still be stuck in this dead end.

In that case…

“The duel only comes to an end once one of the Objects has been destroyed. As such, the signal known as the white flag shall have no effect.”

Staivia thought as the meaningless explanations continued.

If nothing would change her fate, was it not her duty to ensure as few other people as possible got wrapped up in it? Was it not foolishness to send those who cared for her to their deaths for the sake of a meaningless and worthless battle?

Yulenzak who had once rubbed her young head was gone. The White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company had been entombed in darkness.

Mikfa, the maid who had loved her to the end, had had a blade pressed against her throat.

And it all because of Staivia.

It had been that reasoning that had led to her distance herself from everything. And as a result, no one had stayed with her. Everyone around her was an enemy and even her own bodyguards had betrayed her and turned their guns on her. Even if Staivia called for help using the Object's radio, she would likely receive no response. She had cut all such connections with her own hands.

And so she did not speak.

She did not know what she could say.

The radio's microphone was right there and she knew a channel was open to reach outside, but Staivia's mouth merely flapped open and closed. She was unable to utter even a shout.

It was an unsightly result.

But this was the conclusion that awaited her due to her attempts to lessen the amount of damage as much as possible.

Staivia Nikolaschka had no choice but to view this as the best possible ending.

The best possible ending was to sit in this useless Object and be blown away by great firepower without being able to counterattack even once.

“Ahh, ahh.”

Staivia leaned against the back of the cockpit chair and looked straight up. The kind of voice she could never utter in the public eye escaped her lips.

All the pretty decorations were stripped away because she knew no one could hear her.

“…I didn’t want to die…”

The curtain opened on this murderous stage.

The main cannon of an Object that symbolized war would be violently aimed at a girl of only 14.

All sorts of preparations had been made to perfectly justify it.

It had been made into something no one could raise any objection against.

Part 12

The four members of Unicorn landed in Flightburg Air Force Base in the large transport helicopter. It seemed the other members who had been scattered across the Amazon district had already gathered there. Sogia could see a few figures casually salute him when they caught sight of him.

Colonel Marechiare, the man in a deep gray beret and sunglasses, spoke briefly.

“I must insist that you stay here in the base until Prince Dimiksy’s Royal Duel is over. The duel itself is legal, but some very dirty methods have been used to set it up. To prevent possible interference, I prefer to keep as many elements as possible contained until everything is over.”

“I’m relieved you do not intend to silence us more permanently.”

“If I was planning that, you would have disappeared to the ends of the earth. Hiding in chaotic areas of conflict is your specialty after all. After heading through a few battlefields, I would have completely lost your trail.”

“It’s those of you on the upper levels of the military that are maintaining these assassination zones known as battlefield countries. Even if you could not get rid of them entirely, surely you could make them more compact. We are only using the system you set up.”

That made Marechiare grin.

He must have felt more confident now that he was back on his home turf because he did not try to hide his true intentions.

“We maintain the things we need. But everyone wants the same thing, so there is a constant overabundance of it. It is the same as the convenience stores in cities.”

“Now there’s a surprise. So even a colonel uses convenience stores.”

“Hmph. Going to an antique shop or a tailor does not fill your stomach.”

They boarded a 4WD off-road vehicle just to cross a wide runway. Every one of the over 1000 people working at the base were on Prince Dimiksy’s side and were actively committing treason, so it was quite a spectacle.

“How long are we confined here? There are around 200 of us total. It’ll cost a lot to feed, clothe, and shelter us.”

“We are not a commercial organization. It is not our job to worry about the money.”

“Tax money doesn’t come from a magical treasure chest, you know?”

“We can continue wringing it out as long as war continues. And if they refuse, they will be branded as traitors. …And not by us. By their virtuous and ignorant neighbors.”

The 4WD vehicle stopped near the command facility. Marechiare led Sogia, Sanya, Mars, and Flat into the building.

Since Unicorn was wearing the same model military uniforms as Flightburg Air Force Base, it was impossible to tell at a glance which force anyone belonged to.

And then Mars asked, “…Excuse me. May I use the restroom?”

“Colonel, surely it’s better than having him piss himself. But if needed, I can order him to hold it.”

“You may move about freely. One of my men can show you the way if necessary.”

Once Marechiare had given permission to move about, Sogia snapped his fingers.

“Sanya, check the deposits in our bank account. Flat, check whether

all the Unicorn members are here or not. Once you're done, borrow a kitchen to make some food. That market junk food has numbed my tongue. Who knows what kind of meat we were eating. I might have been fed some little grey."

When he heard that, Marechiare casually pointed out, "My unit eats rations except for Fridays when we have curry."

"You can make surprisingly humane foods with a simple heater. Not when I make it, though."

After the other members left, Sogia followed Marechiare further into the facility.

After entering a private room for officers, Marechiare removed the jacket of his high-quality uniform and sank into the sofa. He pulled a nicely cooled champagne bottle and two glasses from a small refrigerator.

Sogia gave a small smile.

"Isn't it a bit early to celebrate?"

"There is no deep meaning to this. I just want a drink because I am thirsty. Plus, this is paid for by the military budget."

Sogia accepted a glass filled with a gold liquid and downed it in a single gulp. Seeing that, Marechiare gave a thin smile and slowly tipped his own glass.

"I see you still have no concept of restraint."

"I'm still not old enough to worry about my blood pressure."

Sogia placed his empty glass on the table while Marechiare spoke as if reminiscing.

"So it's been 3 years since we first joined forces. It all started when you attacked Princess Staivia's bodyguard unit in that South American desert. I had heard about your miniature thermobaric bombs, but even I was taken aback when you created a cluster bomb out of them and scattered them over the White Bears' heads."

“Well, it was a dangerous gamble on our part, too. We needed a flashy present to properly establish a connection with you. And we wanted to make doubly sure since we were up against the elite White Bears. I was a bit worried when their bodies were completely unrecoverable since that might make you doubt us.”

“We were having trouble with Yulenzak and his 115th as well. I suppose you did need to go that far to truly eliminate them.”

Sogia and the rest of Unicorn had been the ones to eliminate Princess Staivia’s royal guard unit during a military exercise, but it had not been on the orders of Marechiare and the others supporting Prince Dimiksy.

Marechiare’s group had been planning their own attack, but Unicorn had beaten them to it.

“The 202nd Mobile Support Company,” muttered Marechiare. “Unicorn. The mysterious and secret unit that uses the framework of the foreign legion. Every member has undergone plastic surgery and had their fingerprints and palm prints forcibly altered by burning them and letting them heal. Rumor even has it their blood type has been changed by receiving a bone marrow transplant from someone else.”

“The foreign legion system is only there to fool the Legitimacy Kingdom Lineage Department that won’t shut up about bloodline and DNA. If you use that framework, you don’t need to have your lineage recorded. You announce from the beginning that you have outsider blood, so you fall outside the standards,” said Sogia as he traced a finger across the scars from stiches that circled his neck.

A closer inspection showed that the color of the skin changed slightly along that line.

“Did you go that far to hide your identity in order to create these connections of yours?” asked Marechiare, sounding truly curious. “The Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization. Creating connections between all of those world powers sounds nice, but the walls of religion, race, and ideology will always get in the way. By making it

more ambiguous where you are from, I suppose you could make all of that more convenient."

"And?"

"I do not know exactly how far your connections spread below the surface, but they are sure to be a great asset to Prince Dimiksy," said Marechiare while finally finishing off his glass of champagne. "But we must make sure that only acts in our favor. We cannot have Prince Dimiksy growing too arrogant. We only want an influential person who is easy to manipulate."

"So you want data on our connections to set up your means of control?"

"Full comprehension of the power balance around an influential person is the foundation needed to control him through the power game. If Prince Dimiksy wishes to bring you into his system, cooperate with him. Registering a bug-filled program on the network will only bring you down with it."

"I see. That makes sense," said Sogia with a light smile. And then he added, "But, colonel, you are mistaken about something."

"What is that?"

"It was not to construct our connections that we underwent plastic surgery, rewrote our fingerprints, palm prints, and other biometrics, changed our blood type with a bone marrow transplant, and evaded being recorded by the Lineage Department." Marechiare looked confused, but Sogia ignored him and continued. "In fact, you misinterpreted the circumstances of our actions 3 years ago when we destroyed the White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company that were Staivia's most trusted men. Then again, we set it up so you would misinterpret it, so I have no right to blame you there."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't get it?"

Sogia reached out a hand and used a finger to lightly push the

champagne glass on the table.

The delicate glass easily toppled and shattered with a solid sound.

Sogia continued as the disturbing noise rang out.

“The brand new 202nd Mobile Support Company first saw the light of day when the White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company were destroyed. When we contacted you, you had to have hurriedly gathered information on Unicorn. And you accepted what you found. Our classification level was too high for information to be found on the military database, but Unicorn’s ‘evil deeds’ had left their mark on plenty of civilian-run military news sites. …Not that anyone could tell when exactly those articles had been added in.”

“You can’t mean…”

“And the White Bears were so thoroughly annihilated that there was nothing left for a funeral. Who the corpses belonged to could not be confirmed. And due to a vaccine shortage and an outbreak of an infection disease of an older era, people were dropping like flies in that blank area in South America. There were so many corpses that they had to be burned right away or they would pile up. With all that information at hand, surely you have arrived at the answer.” Sogia…no, someone using that name gave a thin smile. “A unit completely disappeared and another unit that had undergone plastic surgery appeared at the exact same time. If you still haven’t figured it out, you really are an idiot.”

“You mean Princess Staivia’s most trusted men were not killed…? You mean Yulenzak and his royal guard unit simply changed their name to Unicorn!?”

Marechiare immediately tried to grab the telephone on the table, but Sogia stood up from the sofa and crushed the phone and Marechiare’s hand under his foot.

“We learned five years ago that Prince Dimiksy was making preparations to take Princess Staivia’s life using a Royal Duel. We also knew there was nothing we could do about it even though we

knew. So we had to take some drastic measures. We needed to cast aside our position as the White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company and take up a new position where we could deal with the situation from a different angle."

"Gah!?"

"Let me tell you one legend about the unicorn, colonel."

As Marechiare let out a short cry, Sogia pulled out his PDW with a smooth motion. It was a machinegun small enough to fit inside a business bag. He held it in one hand and aimed it at the older man's face.

"It is a beast that shows no interest in power or treasure and instead does everything it can to protect a pure maiden, you monster."

Part 13

A short burst of gunshots resounded throughout the air force base.

The base had over 1000 professional soldiers, so the difference in military might was too great for Unicorn to have any chance in a straight fight.

However…

Trained soldiers had a thoroughly ingrained habit of almost reflexively hiding behind nearby cover if they suddenly heard explosions or gunfire. This spot was also known as the primary screen. If one knew the patrol routes of the soldiers, it was a simple task to know where all of those spots inside the air force base would be.

And what if…?

What if all of those spots known as the primary screen had been filled with bombs or other traps?

The answer was simple.

After that initial burst of gunfire, almost all of the soldiers hid themselves in foxholes that had been filled with bombs.

Sanya, Mars, Flat, and the others wandering around the air force base pressed the buttons on their radios in unison.

The second wave rang out.

It was almost humorous how those countless explosions wore down that great military force that would have been undefeatable via normal methods.

“What happened?” Sanya had once asked.

The actions leading to Princess Staivia's assassination had already begun 5 years before. The White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company had tried to resist via the political power game, but Dimiksy's faction had taken the offensive more powerfully and – more importantly – more quickly than expected.

Sogia had replied, "They've really done it now. They blew away the pilot Elite of the Assault Signal in a café. It was probably done to prepare a pawn for their Royal Duel. After going this far, nothing is going to slow them down. If we could gather physical proof of this conspiracy, they wouldn't just be given a cup of sweet poison. They'd have their heads taken off in the public square."

"How much time do we have?"

"At most, 5 years. At worst, 3 years."

Sanya had sighed.

She had thought about her duties, career goals, and private goals, but then cast them all aside.

"…So what do we need to do?"

"We need to keep our focus on what will happen 5 years from now."

"It's begun," muttered Sanya.

Mars replied, "Yeah, it has. I still can't believe my very first mission upon joining the 115th was to kill my old self! What the hell!? And everything since then has been dirty work!!"

He may have been speaking lightly, but he showed no mercy with his gun. He was firing bullet after bullet to end the lives of the soldiers who had somehow survived the second wave attack using the primary screen locations.

Unicorn was not using assault rifles; they were using extremely small PDWs that were less than 30 cm long and had a grenade

launcher forcibly attached to the bottom of the barrel.

They had originally equipped themselves with those full-auto weapons that could be fired with only one hand so they could lead Princess Staivia to safety while pumping out plenty of firepower.

But now they were simply bathing in the splattered blood of their enemies.

It may have been due to the sensors, but despite being deemed a “newcomer”, Mars had excellent firing accuracy. He was using a targeting correction device known as a multi-dot. The standard red point of light would appear in the center of the lens, but a blue and green dot would be added as well.

A PDW that used handgun bullets had a range of about 150 meters, but Mars could easily hit targets over 250 meters away.

At times like that, the blue dot was displayed below the center red one. If he aimed at the enemy using that light, the barrel would naturally be pointed upwards. Pulling the trigger then would send the bullet in a high-angle trajectory similar to a long throw in baseball. It could then reach farther than if fired straight.

Among the other modes it contained was one that displayed the estimated position of a moving enemy soldier. As long as one possessed the foundational physical strength needed, the device could improve one’s accuracy.

It gave the same feeling often seen in FPSs where one could aim arbitrarily toward an enemy and naturally target their vitals. That might be the simplest way to imagine it.

Three years before, Mars had shouted out in a South American desert just after joining the unit.

“Ahh, ahh! What is with this unit and all its pain-in-the-ass circumstances!? I just wanted to be able to brazenly walk in and out of the royal household despite being a commoner, so why is this my very first mission!? Why do we have to fake our deaths and hide all

traces of our existence!?”

“…We aren’t forcing you to go along with it,” Sogia had replied as he scratched at his sandy face. “To be honest, this job really isn’t worth it. We have little odds of success. We have to cast aside all of our career goals to prepare for this. And even if by some miracle we defeat Dimiksy’s faction, all that awaits us is a court martial and some barracks. And since we have no sponsor, we will receive next to no reward. I’d have difficulty finding anything to entice you along with. But,” Sogia had paused for a beat before calmly continuing. “Even so, all the complete idiots who still want to save that girl from those pieces of trash and their lust for power are to come with me.”

“Chehh… I may be going along with this, but just know that you don’t play fair.”

“And if you’re willing to reluctantly agree to it despite saying that, then you must be quite softhearted.”

Mars had clicked his tongue, averted his gaze, and scratched at his head.

He had then asked a desperate question.

“So what do we get? You said we received ‘next to no’ reward, right?”

“We do get something,” Sogia had immediately replied with a small smile. “The pride as knights and the proof of justice. …That’s all we get.”

“Heh. You’re just greedy. That’s plenty for me.”

But…

“That was fast!! Sanya, Flat, that was super fast!!”

“Having to peer through the sight like that slows you down too much, newcomer!”

Sanya and Flat were not receiving help from their sensors. Instead of peering through the sight to aim, they were aiming and firing almost completely on instinct. One did not look down to check one's hands for every chord while playing the guitar or piano. It was the same as that. Their firearms had become a part of their bodies, so they could fire accurately without having to painstakingly confirm everything visually. That was why they were so fast. As long as one allowed the recoil to escape properly, one did not need to hold the gun perfectly by the book either. Even if Mars was increasing his accuracy by following the standard methods, he could not catch up on a fundamental level.

That was the difference between someone who relied on the products of the modern clean wars and someone who had plenty of experience walking through battlefield countries around the world using dirty methods to make up for not having an Object.

"You people are monsters! It's like you have no intention of letting me catch up!"

"It's because you can't catch up that you are still a rookie! Now stay away from that wall!!"

As Mars was just about to carelessly charge forward, Sanya grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him away. In the next instant, a powered suit crashed through the wall next to where he had been. If he had continued on, he would have received a blow as bad as getting hit by a car.

Still holding Mars's collar with one hand, Sanya adjusted her hold on her PDW's grip to prepare to fire the grenade launcher. She fired accurately at the powered suit. What she fired was actually a failed design for a handheld flare meant for infantry, but it emitted enough heat that sensors would mistake it for the output of a fighter jet engine. It used sodium nitrate and a few other chemicals to create a heat source of greater than 2000 degrees for around 60 seconds. Even if it did not melt the armor of the powered suit, it was more than enough to overheat the internal circuitry. All the delicate equipment would become no more useful than a tin can.

Flat then threw an anti-personnel fragmentation grenade. The blast

knocked over the unmoving powered suit. The boarding hatch was underneath, so it would need to be flipped over with a crane or something for the soldier to get out.

“How did you see that coming? There was no warning.”

“If you try to detect everything with just your five senses, you’ll fall victim to surprise attacks. You need to think about what you would do if you were the enemy. Do you get it now, newcomer?”

With an explosive noise, black smoke began spewing from a side passage.

Some enemy soldiers came running frantically out, but they were soon accurately shot with bullets that came flying from the same side passage.

Finally, Sogia stepped out.

“C’mon, we need to get this done quickly. If we don’t do enough damage while they’re still panicking from this surprise attack, this is going to get really annoying!”

After the White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company had become the 202nd Mobile Support Company known as Unicorn, they had carried out all sorts of horrible deeds below the surface all over the world.

They had needlessly sullied their hands and created various connections in return.

After one such job was complete, Flat had said the following to Sogia.

“We’re going to hell, aren’t we?”

“It may not look like it, but this is the quickest path available to us. We don’t have time for anything else.”

“But will Staivia’s faction last long enough?”

“Her maid Mikfa is very capable. If she gives it her all, they should be able to last just long enough. But even if she does her very best, 2 years is our limit. We need to expand our network even further.”

“…But while we do this, Lady Staivia is probably crying all alone.”

She was not just a symbol or a name on a document to them. They knew Staivia Nikolaschka as a person.

They knew she got motion sickness and therefore did not like riding on ships or planes. They knew that no matter how bad a mood she was in, she could almost always be cheered up with some beef stroganoff.

It was because they knew those trivial bits of humanity that they could put up with it all.

And it was a disgrace for her royal guard unit if Princess Staivia shed even a single tear.

They wanted to go right that instant and beat the shit out of the bastards behind the plan to assassinate her. They wanted to crush the source of what was causing her to cry.

But they sealed up those feelings and focused on sharpening their fangs as soldiers.

“Then there is only one thing we can do,” Sogia had muttered quietly. “We must risk our lives to make it up to her.”

Sogia, Sanya, Mars, Flat.

Those four met up on the battlefield and headed towards their goal point while spraying bullets everywhere.

“Hey, did you three remember to destroy the armored vehicles? Oh, and the aircrafts. The powered suits aren’t the height of their firepower.”

“Team bravo and delta went around destroying those. They poured

tons of sugar in their tanks. And as for the aircrafts…well, they spread flames through the ammunition space of the gunships waiting on the runway, and now it's like hell on earth over there. I guess you could call it a giant and deadly pinwheel firework. When one thing catches fire it catches the next thing on fire, so the whole thing is still expanding."

"Clear, clear!" shouted Mars.

"Mars, you missed one. Please do this right. Clear."

They were headed for the central control room.

Their first and final trump card for the cutting edge Object the Dimiksy faction had prepared lay there.

"What was that about Mars!? Did that newcomer do something wrong again!?"

"Can you please not start that at a time like this!?" begged Mars. "Clear, clear!!"

And then Sogia casually said, "Oh, right. I forgot to ask. How did it go gathering evidence of Dimiksy's faction's treason?"

"We're turning all that evidence into a sea of flames right now."

"That's not good! If we can't prove anything, we'll just be mass murderers!!" shouted Mars.

"Give up on the court martial, newcomer. We were plenty guilty from the moment we caused an entire military unit to disappear."

As the chaos of that hellish firefight continued to create more and more chaos, Sogia reached for the large communications equipment an enemy communications soldier had been carrying.

He tapped on the microphone with a finger.

"Ahh, ahh. What? Is this thing working???"

"It'll reach to the other side of the planet. Including to that girl

stuffed inside that old Object."

"Is that so?"

Sogia arbitrarily called up the frequency memory while wearing down the enemy's numbers with short bursts of gunfire. He then casually brought the microphone up to his mouth

And he spoke.

His voice reached the Assault Signal's cockpit where it floated in the ocean.

Staivia Nikolaschka's eyes opened wide.

She definitely heard it.

She heard the voice she had once innocently relied on.

She heard the words of the owner of that large hand.

"Hey, baby. How long are you going to keep crying? It's about time you smiled."

It had taken 5 years of fighting, but the miracle was complete.

In that world of rotten wars, the groundwork of great bloodshed had led to a small miracle that showed the pride of knights and the proof of justice.

Part 14

Meanwhile, the two idiots Quenser and Heivia were lying collapsed on the floor.

They had just learned the general situation thanks to the open radio exchange between Unicorn and Staivia and some additional information provided by the maid Mikfa (who it seemed had only just learned what was going on).

And after finishing her explanations, Mikfa let out a frantic voice.

“Wh-why are you suddenly lying stricken on the ground!? It is too early to be experiencing burnout!!”

“I can’t believe this!!”

“We were beaten!! We were completely outdone!! Vah! There’s nothing we can do!! I want to jump on them and beat the shit out of them, but I can’t find fault in them after they settled everything so nicely! Okay, that was a wonderful story! Thank you very much! The more we try to cut in, the worse we look!!”

“What are we supposed to do? The more we dig, the more damage is done to us… I’m sure they would have no problem acting all cool and saying they’re prepared to be court martialed!! No!! I don’t want to be a jobber!!”

It seemed they had guessed fairly accurately what Unicorn’s catch phrase was.

But Mikfa did not care about the pride of some pathetic idiots.

Even if the situation had changed, Princess Staivia had still been forced aboard the Assault Signal as a target.

“I-I assume Unicorn is in the central control room trying to acquire the emergency shutdown code for the Object. It is a lifeline used to prevent the pilot Elite from going on a rampage.”

“And what does that leave for us!? What is Quenser the meaningless side character supposed to do!?”

“I doubt there is any assurance they will be able to acquire the emergency shutdown code and if Dimiksy’s Object fires its main cannon before it can be shut down, it is all over! We need to buy time to save Lady Staivia!!”

“…”

“…”

Quenser and Heivia fell silent.

While Mikfa was panicking a good bit internally, those two idiots stood up once more.

“…We can save Princess Staivia?”

“Yes, that is what I have been saying!”

“…It couldn’t happen without us?”

“We are the only ones here!!”

The two boys exchanged a glance.

And then they let out some dark laughter.

“…Heh heh heh. Hey, Heivia. How about we take it all for ourselves at the very, very end? Let’s put our own wonderful story on top of theirs to make theirs completely useless.”

“While we’re at it, how about we carry the princess out in our arms right in front of those knights who have been working at this for 5 long years.”

“We still have one important job left: Kicking those self-important Unicorn bastards right in the nuts.”

“Kicking a corpse in the balls is boring. We need to make sure those heroes have tears in their eyes.”

Mikfa began to seriously wonder if shooting those two in the back right there would be the best way to protect Staivia's chastity, but she had to worry about protecting the princess's life first.

Quenser and Heivia were not stupid enough to plan on simply standing in front of a cutting edge Object. They would not agree to such a proposal and they would simply end up crushed even if they did. Their enemy would have no reason to stop.

"Hey, let's start by doing something about that pain-in-the-ass jamming. Just like we already planned to. Let's cut the airport's emergency power."

"Then what?"

"We ask for help from the Legitimacy Kingdom military of course. What can we do on our own? Only an Object can stand up to an Object. So it would be fastest just to ask for help."

"If an Object would come if we called for help, Lady Staivia would not be having so much trouble in the first place!!"

"We can do it now," immediately corrected Quenser. "After all, the Royal Duel can no longer be considered fair thanks to Unicorn's rampage. We won't take sides. We will call for help for both Prince Dimiksy and Princess Staivia. Then they don't need to worry about whose side they're on. We can get help to protect both of them from Unicorn's interference."

"Only Dimiksy's faction wants this conflict over succession to result in killing. Even if someone wants Dimiksy to inherit the throne, it's only natural to want a spare in the bloodline in case of a sudden illness, accident, or assassination. In that case, a soldier would want to save both of them if the outcome of the situation is unclear."

"…"

Mikfa stared at the two of them dumbfounded.

To save one of them, the other had to be killed.

Dimiksy's faction had spent many long years manipulating

information to set up that condition. Mikfa had tried to resist it all, but that line of thinking had become entrenched in her mind without her even realizing it.

Had Unicorn…no, the White Bears of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company thought of that way out?

Quenser and Heivia would prepare several means of interference to buy enough time for the emergency shutdown code to be entered.

“Hey, Quenser! Where’s the emergency power supply? We need to hurry up and blow it up!”

“It’s a diesel engine larger than a school swimming pool! If the gas catches fire, the entire float will be split in two!!”

As they walked through the underground (or internal?) portion of the float, the two idiots moved towards the central portion of the emergency power supply. The area beyond the door was like a sauna. Countless metal boxes and pipes were crammed inside and each one had a panel and handle attached.

“…I don’t like this arrangement. I doubt there are, but there had better not be any soldiers hiding in here.”

“I’m more worried about traps. This steam limits our vision and all the noise masks any small sounds.”

“Come to think of it, we’ve basically opened up the hood of a giant car engine and jumped in. This is not an environment for a human being.”

They slowly and cautiously continued inside.

Quenser and Heivia read through the thick manual on the wall and operated a few handles and levers. After a hard struggle, the readings finally began to drop before their eyes.

“Oh, that’s right. The guys from the naval base are up above. This will stop the defense system shooting up that Latin guy and the other honor students, right?”

“Oh, I’d completely forgotten. It makes me feel like Urashima Tarou. How much time has passed since then?”

They felt no tension over the issue because they were not entirely sure those people were even worth protecting. The situation might have been quite different had they met even a single beautiful woman on that base.

With the emergency power down, Quenser and Heivia headed for the top of the float. Since it was too dangerous for the maid Mikfa to stand on the front lines otherwise, they had made her put on one of the powered suits left by Dimiksy’s faction. Quenser himself had destroyed an identical model, so they knew it was not a perfect defense. However, it did lower the odds of her being killed by a stray bullet.

“We’re headed up top, but don’t stand on the edge of the float. If you do fall into the ocean, don’t panic and perform an emergency eject. If you pull the huge levers in the right and left wrists at the same time, you’ll be ejected. If you escape before sinking 10 meters down, the water pressure won’t be an issue. If you fall further than that, decompression sickness will make it dangerous.”

“With this, I can fight too!” announced Mikfa.

“Fight what? Surely you don’t mean the Object.”

“Dragon breath has a horrible stench to it. If it so much as scratches you, the armor will melt.”

They climbed up the stairs and onto the top of the float. On a ship, it would have been called the deck.

The Assault Signal that Princess Staivia was aboard had already made its way out from beneath the float. It was now heading up to the surface thanks to its giant floats. Princess Staivia had not been trained as a pilot Elite, so it was doubtful she could perform even that basic a maneuver. A program may have been sending it to a set starting point based on the rules of the Royal Duel.

The surface of the float was several kilometers across and the

Object was over 50 meters across. It was a sight that threw one's sense of distance out of order. The tiltrotor crafts deployed around the area and the surface-to-air missile units that had been shooting them down a moment before all looked like toys.

"I see three large transport planes. Each one can probably hold around 100 people. Looks like more survived than didn't, don't you think? I guess those old models aren't all that useful since they're too easily tricked by chaff and flares. If this place had been equipped with the anti-air lasers Objects use, it would've all been over instantly."

"The problem is that none of them will think too much about why they survived. In fact, they'll probably hold a grudge against us."

"How can you two be so cruel?" asked Mikfa. "A-and more importantly, how is Lady Staivia!?"

"More importantly? You're just as cruel as us."

"More importantly? You're just as cruel as us."

The two idiots gave that simultaneous comment, but it seemed maidens came with a function that let them shut out any inconvenient voices.

Staivia's Assault Signal had no obvious signs of damage. Unless those who had procured it for the royal family had hidden a cup of poison for suicide, Staivia would be safe within the cockpit.

But that was no relief.

Something gigantic was moving on the distant sea.

"Here it comes, Quenser. It's here!! That's an Object!!"

"Which one!? Dimiksy's? Or reinforcements from the Amazon district!?"

Those two extreme options were like a coin toss deciding life or death, but fate always had a way of sneering at those two idiots.

It might have been due to the powered suit's digital magnifying ability or it may have been due to her experience from her long years serving the Nikolaschka family. Whatever the reason, it was the maid Mikfa who answered.

"The Object has the Nikolaschka family coat of arms on it. As well as decorative ribbons to indicate the individual. The ribbons are blue and gold. That is Dimiksy's!!"

"Not good. So not good!! Is help not going to arrive in time!?"

"Dimiksy probably intercepted the request for help. He's going to be on guard for a shot from extreme long distance or a surprise attack from the bottom of the ocean. Otherwise, he wouldn't be approaching so slowly. After all, this is the main dish he's spent 5 years preparing for. He has to want to charge in and devour it."

Quenser used binoculars to get as many details about the Object as he could.

Below the spherical main body it had two long floats extending from front to back. It also had three leg-like parts extending from both the right and left.

"It primarily uses an air cushion. It can operate on both sea and land without swapping out parts. But those insect-like legs are different. Does it also use the laser method…? No, those are…"

"What is it, Quenser?"

"The legs on either side are forced brakes. They might work like pile bunkers. It's the type to make tight turns by slightly altering the resistance between the two sides. In a close quarters fight, it can fly around like lightning."

"That seems like a needless fear since Lady Staivia cannot move at all."

"I want to give any hint I can to the Object that comes to help. It would leave a bad taste in my mouth if I watched on doing nothing."

Its main cannons were likely the six large cannons sticking out of the front of the spherical main body. They were bound together like a Gatling gun, but Quenser could not spot any mechanism for rotating them.

"…They're laser beams."

"Wait, wait. It has six ridiculously huge cannons strapped together? Isn't that really, really bad? How much firepower does that have?"

"No, Heivia. Do you know why the battleships from an older era lined up two or three main cannons together?"

"What? Wasn't it to double or triple their power?"

"No. They did not have the accuracy for long distance shots back then. They did it to raise their accuracy. They fired multiple shots at once, but it was a great success if even one of them hit. Which means…"

"This bastard has six cannons strapped together because he couldn't hit if he didn't?"

"The actual tech used may not be that high level. If we have a usable Object on our side, this might be over surprisingly quickly."

Dimiksy's faction had spent years preparing for this day. They had made sure Staivia could not fight back no matter what. The actual ability of the Object was of no consequence. They knew no counterattack was coming, so they might have just needed to prepare any old Object as long as its main cannon could fire.

The average construction cost of an Object was 5 billion dollars.

When maintenance and operation costs were added in, the price shot even further up.

Even if Dimiksy was a member of the royal Nikolaschka family, it had to have been difficult to prepare two of them.

"…Is that really so?" muttered the maid Mikfa.

While still peering through his binoculars, Quenser asked, “Is what really so?”

“Dimiksy is both a member of the royal Nikolaschka family and an officially registered Object pilot Elite. Although it was almost entirely to increase his authority, so he has never been sent to the front lines before. …But this is an Object created for a royal to use. Would the technology used really be so crude?”

“…Do you know what system genealogy Dimiksy uses?”

“It was a second generation Object focused on laser beams. However, this one is different. Also, I have heard some disturbing rumors concerning Dimiksy. It may have been nothing more than propaganda to increase his influence further, but…”

“?”

Quenser looked puzzled and Mikfa continued.

“It is said the cutting edge Broad Sky Saber developed for Dimiksy Nikolaschka has exceeded the boundaries of the second generation and approached the third generation.”

An unpleasant pause continued for a short while.

“Heh,” laughed Heivia scornfully.

He seemed to be trying desperately to force down the fear that had welled up somewhere in his chest.

“That’s probably just the special hope of the influential. It was the same in that Oceanian military nation. They went on and on about how they had developed an Object, but it was just a piece of junk that only reached generation 0.5.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that we almost died.”

At that point, a small electronic tone sounded from Quenser’s radio.

“This is the standing defense unit of the Amazon district military. We have accepted your request for assistance. The second

generation Forest Roller will be dispatched to the combat area. We wish to use the source of your transmission as a marker to distinguish friend from foe. Is that okay?"

"No! We are being targeted by an Object! An Object from the Legitimacy Kingdom. If we used such an obvious marker, Dimiksy would just blow us away!!"

"Then what should we do!?"

"We'll take care of the flesh-and-blood enemies. The Forest Roller should focus on Dimiksy! Your objective is to keep the Objects from fighting. Silence any Object that tries to resist but try not to kill the Elite! Everyone here needs to be protected. Simple, right!?"

"Understood. Give my regards to the rumored princess. We'll be putting on quite the show for her, but tell her to try not to fall in love with me. If this does get her wet, it's only the suspension bridge effect."

"I cannot ignore that vulgar comment! Does that operator want to be arrested for lese-majesty!?" shouted the maid in a shrill voice, but Quenser and Heivia were relieved that she was back to her normal self.

Yes.

They were relieved.

Even though the enemy had yet to fire. No, even though they knew there was no such thing as "going easy on you" or a "safe zone" when it came to the weapons known as Objects.

(Come to think of it, what is that thing?)

A sudden question entered Quenser's mind as he waited for the Forest Roller to arrive.

It was on the back of Dimiksy's Broad Sky Saber. A unit similar to a steel tower was attached there as if it was carrying a giant sword on its back.

(Is it a large-scale antenna for information warfare? No, it's too big for that. It has to be something important enough to risk putting its center of gravity off balance.)

It felt like a rough sweater scratching at his neck.

He converted that strange feeling that something was out of place into words.

(That isn't a steel tower attached to an Object. With that relative weight, it's more like they attached an Object to a steel tower…)

He soon found the answer to his question.

The enemy gave it to him.

A brilliant white flash of light as if from welding burst from the base of the steel tower.

Quenser quickly recalled his fear of Objects and immediately got down on the float's surface. Heivia tried to knock the maid Mikfa to the ground because she was standing there blankly, but the thick powered suit would not budge. The hard impact knocked the boy back onto the ground.

"Ow, dammit! What the hell was that!? Did Dimiksy fire something!?"

"Wait…this is odd. What is that!?" shouted Quenser as he lay dumbfounded on his back.

Something had shot at high speed through the steel tower on the back of the Broad Sky Saber. The pure white light shot up along the vertical tower and fired some mass with it. The mass was about the size of a small truck.

Quenser assumed it was a shell flying in an arc like a long throw in baseball.

But he was wrong.

"Wait, wait, wait!! What is that…? That isn't a long throw. It shot

that thing up into the sky!!"

"It resembled a container," said Mikfa. "The kind of container used in laser space elevators."

"It didn't just resemble one. …That is a space elevator!!"

Two different standards were in conflict when it came to modern space development. The mass driver that used railgun technology and laser space elevators that created a "cable of light" by firing a powerful laser beneath a container and stimulating diffuse reflections to explosively expand the air which launched the container upwards.

Quenser and the others had just witnessed a mass of cutting edge military technology of the sort innocently broadcast into people's living rooms to show the peaceful usage of space technology. In other words, it was exactly the type of thing seen on bright and cheerful news broadcasts.

"…Heivia. Do you remember when we were on the Cook Addition Islands and I was invited into that top secret facility by the designer named Claire?"

"What about it!? I don't want to remember anything about the Night Edge Platoon!!"

"When I was there, Claire said something about the third generation of Objects possibly carrying on the genes of the Tri-Core."

"The Tri-Core?" said Mikfa. "I remember hearing a commentator on a talk show making fun of it because its ability to drill for and transport oil left it overbalanced."

"That's the problem with the people who didn't actually fight the thing! Do you have any idea how many times we almost died back then!?"

"And I didn't know maids watched talk shows," said Quenser with an odd sense of fascination. "The military does more than send weapons at each other. The Tri-Core built the lifeline of oil into the Object itself. It was an ambitious design that built a valuable facility

into itself. To break free of the current need to protect the drilling and refinement facilities, they gave the facilities themselves the power to fight and freely move around."

Even with three Objects protecting an oil refinement facility, an enemy Object could still destroy it on a suicide mission and a stray shell could always blow it away. But if the important facility that was as delicate as an egg was given the toughness of an Object, the risk lessened.

Or at the very least, someone had forced through a large-scale public project using that thinking.

That was why the Tri-Core had been allowed three reactors. The makers had believed it would provide far more benefit than three separate Objects.

"So is Dimiksy's Broad Sky Saber similar to that?"

"Space development bases are another type of important facility that is difficult to move. A facility that provides great benefits will be a prime target. Usually, a large-scale defensive line is needed to prevent an enemy Object from attacking a space development base. Even if no one ever attacks, just sustaining that defensive line costs massive amounts of money…"

"So you're saying they can break free of that problem by turning the Object itself into a space development base? And the JPlevelMHD reactor provides the large power output needed."

It went beyond the simple battles.

This was an Object that had a source of massive amounts of money built into it.

This was the third generation.

This was a great flow that would affect everyone from the highest officer to the lowest soldier and – if viewed in a broader sense – would affect every one of the billions of people that were affected by war. When viewed that way, Dimiksy's Broad Sky Saber did indeed dig deeper into the idea of war than the second generation

that focused solely on combat.

“But what did Dimiksy fire into space?” asked Mikfa.

“I dunno. Maybe the bastard chickened out and fled.”

The three of them naturally looked up into the sky.

The eerily blue sky blocked their view so they could not see what was happening in space.

But…

In the next moment…

An orange light fell from the heavens and Quenser finally realized what the true value of the enemy Object was.

It happened beyond the horizon.

Due to the earth being round, Quenser and the others could not see where the beam of light landed. Or so it should have been. Nevertheless, they saw it. Something exploded beyond the horizon. The ground had been blown to pieces and rubble from the manmade structures atop the ground was blown into the air. It was all blown dozens…no, hundreds of meters into the air.

“…What?” muttered Heivia as if trying to deny the nightmare he imagined was happening dozens of kilometers away.

His voice quickly turned to a shout.

“What the hell happened!? Did the container fall back down!?”

“This isn’t right. The orange beam of light isn’t going away. That must be an afterimage left by the dust and moisture in the air being roasted.”

As Quenser watched on dumbfounded, he heard a voice come from his radio.

It was from that same operator, but he gave a completely different

impression from before.

“…Kssshhhhh. Kkkssshhhhhhhhh!! This is the standing defense unit of the Amazon district military! Calling all units!! The Forest Roller was heavily damaged on the way to the combat area. I repeat! The Forest Roller was heavily damaged!! It can no longer move!!”

“What the hell…” Heivia had his own radio, but he snatched Quenser’s away. “What the hell!? That was our final trump card!! What the hell happened!?”

“We do not know! From the damage report we received, it was likely hit by a laser weapon from directly above. Do you have any idea what could have done it!?”

They had of course heard nothing about a bomber flying around. Then again, the laser weapons equipped on a bomber could not damage an Object.

Which meant it had to have come from above the sky.

From space.

“…There’s something there. It isn’t just the Broad Sky Saber. No, some weapon that works in conjunction with it is in orbit!!”

“You mean the Broad Sky Saber’s true main cannon separates off into space!?”

The idea of an Object’s cannon separating from it and still being used had been around for a long time.

The cannons could be equipped onto tanks or bombers. Or they could be staked deeply into the ground around the battlefield. Then lasers or microwaves could be used to send power to the cannons so they could fire on a target from multiple directions at once.

But…

“None of the past methods worked. The radiant heat and recoil from a main cannon is enough to destroy a tank or a bomber. And if their armor is forcibly thickened, they crush themselves under their

own weight. And if they are attached directly to the ground, the target can just leave the area once they notice it. But…”

“They can ignore the weight of armor in the weightlessness of space. That way they can increase the armor as much as needed. And even if the target catches on, the main cannon’s range is an entire third of the planet. There’s no way to escape a sword that rains down from the heavens!! This is completely insane!! What happened to the space treaties!? This violates international law! Can they really do this? This destroys the distinction between safe countries and battlefield countries!! With that one Object, they can freely choose 6 or 7 billion people to slaughter!!”

If he wanted to, Dimiksy could destroy Staivia's Assault Signal from the other side of the planet. In all likelihood, the only reason he had showed himself was because the rules of the Royal Duel required for him to be in the same combat area.

"The materials were probably launched into orbit in the name of moon development and then it was constructed up there. His main cannon is growing like a rolling snowball. Who knows how many hundreds of meters it's reached."

“But if it is set up in space,” said Mikfa inside her powered suit, “can’t it be shot down with anti-ballistic missile armaments? I had heard 98% of ballistic missiles can be neutralized in this day and age using a combination of Object anti-air lasers and interception satellites.”

“Did you hear that on a talk show too?” asked Heivia in annoyance. “Modern ballistic missile countermeasures do not blow the weapons to pieces. They cause small but definite scratches that cause them to fall apart due to the friction of the air or atmosphere. I doubt this sky saber of unknown size can be destroyed with a simple scratch.”

“But what if we prepare some large-scale firepower?” suggested the maid. “We could use ballistic missiles of our own to destroy the enemy main cannon in orbit. If I recall, the original method to defend against missiles was to have the enemy ballistic missile swallowed up in the explosion of your own ballistic missile.”

Her reckless idea was that they need not hesitate to use enough firepower to wipe out a large portion of the map because it was in space.

But…

“That main cannon uses Object tech. If the energy running the large-scale main cannon can also be used to run smaller anti-air lasers, it can shoot down every ballistic missile we send its way.”

“Meaning?”

“The situation is hopeless!! He can wipe a location off the map as easily as a normal person can look up a delicious restaurant on their GPS!! It just takes a tap of his finger!!”

Of course, a GPS alone was unreliable against an Object that was constantly moving unpredictably at high speeds. Normally, the six cannons on the front would be used to hold the enemy Object in place. During that time, it could take aim from the orbiting cannon.

As Quenser and the others watched on with no hope, the Broad Sky Saber used the laser space elevator on its back once more.

With a bright light as if from welding, another container was taken to orbit.

“What was that!?”

“I don’t know for sure, but my guess would be a giant battery filled

with power from the Object's reactor. I doubt that's enough to use that main canon, so that sky saber probably also generates power via megasolar or chemical oxygen iodine!"

"You've gotta be kidding me… So what do we do? At this rate, he's gonna repeatedly slap that delicate princess's teary face with that giant, rock-hard cannon he's so proud of!!"

"Please do not say such vulgar things about Lady Staivia even as a joke!!"

"Okay, Heivia. Let's fight back before he can shoot his white stuff all over that innocent girl's hair!!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

The two idiots ignored the screaming maid and continued their conversation.

"But how? He isn't even coming this way! Staivia will be killed before we can even travel the several kilometers to him. And more importantly, I don't want to stand up to that monster!!"

"Heivia, how do you think that sky saber aims?"

"What? It's a collection of space development tech, right? Dimiksy's giant thing probably has GPS functionality. He can look down at the women's bath from above the barrier and take careful aim!"

"In that case, we can take it out with jamming."

Quenser pointed into the distance with his thumb.

He pointed at the numerous large-scale ECM devices that had been installed here and there on the float to interfere with Staivia and Mikfa's communications.

"Let's cut the power cables for the defense system and then reactivate the airport's emergency power. If we alter the direction of the ECM antennae, we should be able to interfere with his GPS!!"

Part 15

Unicorn's attack on Flightburg Air Force Base had gone well, yet Sogia grimaced.

Mars spoke within the central control room they had taken over.

"…What is it?"

They had acquired the emergency shutdown code for the Broad Sky Saber. It was a numerical string represented by 13 hexadecimal digits stored on a flash memory card about the size of an eraser. The data was stored as an image rather than simply as numbers, so it had to be displayed, read by a human, and then manually inputted into the hotline that was disconnected from the military network and connected the control room to the Object.

This was of course to ensure an analog human had to take part in the process somewhere. Otherwise, the danger arose of external interference from hacking.

The flash memory card had a lock that required the thumbprint of the authorized user and it also checked for abnormalities in the perspiration and pulse rate in the thumb. In other words, the security could not be bypassed by "borrowing" the authorized user's thumb by threatening them or knocking them out. Naturally, severing the thumb and carrying it with you was also out of the question.

But reality was very different from a rehearsed exercise carried out in a safe laboratory. It was only natural to be under extreme stress if that emergency shutdown code truly needed to be used in a situation that could alter the outcome of a war. And so the high military officials had prepared an emergency unlock method in case it falsely locked them out. However, this completely defeated the purpose of the primary security method, especially in a situation like this where Unicorn was aware of the alternate method.

That was thanks to approaching the designer known as Claire while

disguised as the Night Edge Platoon.

“Dammit.”

But…

They all noticed something was wrong as soon as they stuck the flash memory card into the control console and tried to read the data inside.

The data was clearly corrupted.

At the very least, it was in no condition for a human being to read it.

The flash memory card had not been physically damaged during the fighting. The box meant to protect that final trump card was not that delicate.

Which meant…

“Did Dimiksy send a dummy emergency shutdown code to Flightburg Air Force Base? Is that what happened?”

“No, they would have used it once beforehand as a test to ensure mutual trust. But the foundation of your idea is sound. Dimiksy’s faction probably didn’t trust those at Flightburg.”

“Then what happened!?”

“They probably used a time-activated virus or something similar to make sure the data was corrupted once the day of the duel arrived.”

“It doesn’t matter what happened.” Sogia kicked the flash memory card while it was stuck in the console, breaking it. “If we can’t stop the Broad Sky Saber, we can’t save Staivia! Not only that, but Dimiksy will know something is wrong with Flightburg. That means we can expect a harsh counterattack!!”

That was when the earth began to tremble violently.

The Forest Roller that was displayed on the giant screen in the

central control room had the red symbol for moderate damage added.

The attack had begun.

They all gulped because they knew what it meant for the trembling of that destruction to reach them several dozen kilometers away.

“Here it comes. We need to get out of here. This base is going to be blown away!!”

While sending instructions over radio to the other members of Unicorn who were still fighting in various parts of Flightburg Air Force Base, Sogia and the others fled the central control room. They needed to get as far away as possible from that base. They needed to escape an attack that was powerful enough to destroy a second generation Object.

But they did not make it in time.

They did not even manage to escape the grounds of the air force base.

The second strike fell.

The central point of Flightburg Air Force Base was dyed in orange. In the next instant, a storm of destruction raged.

The laser had not even lasted a full second.

But the intense heat it created was poured into the surface and that accumulated heat caused the air to explosively expand. This created a tremendously hot wind that reached over 100 degrees. A wall of air like that of a hurricane spread in every direction and the military facilities that had been created to withstand shell bombardments and aerial bombings were blown away.

Would it have been better to be inside a building or outside?

There was no escaping it either way.

Inside, one would be crushed by rubble. Outside, one would be

struck as hard as if by large truck at full speed and all of one's clothes and skin would have been scorched. If one did not stop breathing, the insides of one's lungs would be in danger.

"God…dammit…!!"

Sogia and the others had just run out of the back entrance of the military facility and gotten down on the ground when the strike hit.

The massive scorching wind had swept over them after a few seconds.

The one piece of luck was that the laser had struck on the other side of the facility. Smashing the building killed some of the momentum of the raging wind and they were saved from the majority of the shock.

But they could not avoid the heat.

It was not enough to ignite their uniforms, but a pain still ran across them as if boiling water had been dumped on their heads.

"Gyaaaaaahhhhh!? I'm gonna die. Dammit. I'm gonna die!!"

"Bear with it!! It isn't like your entire body has been covered in white phosphorus!! Quit crying over some light burns, newcomer!!"

"S-Sanya, the fire resistance of your collection saved us. I'm almost unscathed except for the parts that were exposed."

"I have saline and coolant here. Sogia, contact the soldiers with anti-materiel rifles, machineguns, missiles, and any other heavy weapons! They should be able to use their equipment for cooling their gun barrels!!"

"Do we have time for that…?" Sogia dragged his aching body into a standing position, sucked in some of the stingingly hot air, and shouted into his radio. "All survivors, report in! Flightburg Air Force Base has lost its strategic value. All survivors are to split into small groups and leave the base. Do not all head in a single direction. Scatter in every direction. We're being targeted from above. Flee to subway tunnels and anything else you can find!!"

But he received no response.

Was he hearing that steady static because the device had been destroyed by the heat or because there was no one left to respond?

Sogia gritted his teeth, but then he finally heard someone's voice.

He thought it belonged to a survivor, but the voice betrayed his expectations.

It was a woman's voice.

"That's not the right course of action, Unicorn. This is no time to be falling back."

"…? Claire Whist…the designer…?"

Primarily in order to learn about the development of the highly classified Broad Sky Saber, they had approached her to create a connection with someone in the Object design business. The Cook Addition Islands near the equator had been hot, but Sogia felt the memories from that time had been enough of a scorching hell to make that heat seem like nothing.

But why was Claire contacting them now? He frowned.

"Let's go back over the situation," she said. " 'He' already has the answer. Dimiksy Nikolaschka has used every method available to him in order to legally assassinate Staivia Nikolaschka and inherit the throne. And yet his first shot went to the Forest Roller and his second shot went to Flightburg Air Force Base. Why? His target is right in front of him."

"Isn't that just because he wants to kill any interference so he can take his time and enjoy it!? That's why he tried to crush us and the Object coming to help!! And he succeeded!!"

"Exactly. Even you are telling yourself the answer."

"What…?"

As Sogia trailed off, he finally realized something.

The second generation Forest Roller was one thing. But why had he destroyed Flightburg Air Force Base?

The emergency shutdown code in the central control room had been a dummy from the beginning. There had been nothing they could do to the Broad Sky Saber even if Dimiksy had left them alone. And the flesh-and-blood humans of Unicorn had no chance of fighting back against that giant weapon. Even if they fired their rifles that were like peashooters to him, he could simply ignore them and fire on Princess Staivia.

And yet he had gone out of his way to use the Broad Sky Saber to destroy Flightburg Air Force Base.

Even though he had to be itching to get to the main dish of Princess Staivia.

"…There's something here."

"Yes, there is something there. There is something there the Broad Sky Saber wished to destroy even if it meant interrupting his otherwise perfectly progressing plan. And has that something really been destroyed? That strike from the heavens was powerful, but it was also a broad strike against the entire base. It is possible whatever it was has not been completely destroyed."

"…"

Sogia thought as he stared at the red hot ruins of the building.

The odds of success were low, but they were not nonexistent.

However, their plan had been a tightrope walk with less than a fraction of a percentage point chance of success from the beginning. They were not about to despair at low odds of success now.

"I have a message from 'him'," said Claire Whist to Unicorn. " 'Leave the babysitting to us, papa. You need to get to work and dig up whatever it is that guy wanted to get rid of.' "

Part 16

It was summer year-round at the Cook Addition Islands and the ocean there was blue enough to be a tourist location, but the designer Claire was leaning against a wall in an air conditioned passageway. The damage to the research facility had been completely repaired. The corner of the building in which Claire stood had drink vending machines. But it was also the corner in which the material meant to prevent signals from getting out had been removed.

She was of course holding a laptop and she was wirelessly communicating with a communications device left outside the building by the Night Edge Platoon.

The information she transmitted was sent to the Night Edge Platoon, then to a satellite, and finally to South America.

While communicating with Quenser's group and Unicorn, the woman wearing a lab coat over a swimsuit (who claimed to be a member of the genius girls of the facility) whispered to herself.

"I can't have you getting yourselves killed. If you have time to give in to this tragedy, then I need you to bring it to an end."

While sipping on a chilled carbonated beverage, she thought of what had started all this.

When the Object designer named Claire had first heard what was happening from the Night Edge Platoon (that was actually Unicorn in disguise), she had of course thought of the possibility it was a trap. After all, putting on that kind of act was Unicorn's specialty.

Prince Dimiksy was meticulously preparing a plan to assassinate Princess Staivia.

When she had been asked to help stop that, it would have been odd if she had not doubted them.

The following conversation had played out:

“If you doubt us, then use your own network to do some research. I’m sure you have a broader and more detailed network than we do. If you didn’t, we wouldn’t want your network.”

“Hmm…”

Claire Whist gave a small sigh as she controlled an old-style game pad with both hands. The cable connected to her laptop and the screen showed a filthy middle-aged bearded man crawling out of a transport helicopter that had made an emergency landing. The mission was to travel from the spot in the middle of enemy territory where the helicopter had landed to the national border. It was a hellish marathon of about 500 kilometers.

“Do you know what kind of training is needed to develop weapons?” she asked.

“No. I’d guess you need math and physics…and maybe something in the arts for the design side of things.”

“Empty sadism.”

Claire swung the game pad lightly to the side.

The bearded man shot an enemy soldier, stole his off-road vehicle, and drove off.

“In the end, you can’t do this job unless you view killing someone in a distant land as a great deed. Even if all you see are symbols on a military network.”

“You’re saying the ability to carefreely look at those symbols indicates talent as a weapons developer?”

“I don’t like the word ‘talent’. You only ever hear it from the losers who put no real effort into anything. They use it to express their jealousy of the winners. The only difference between the winner and the loser is their growth rate and the time they put into it.”

“What you call the growth rate is what people normally call talent.”

The man from the Night Edge Platoon muttered that last comment under his breath, but he likely intentionally let her read his lips.

He likely had the ability she spoke of as well, so she could not have him be jealous of her. For one thing, his ability for direct killing and trickery were likely greater than her own.

And so the woman wearing a lab coat over a swimsuit continued speaking.

“I am not creating Objects out of patriotism or benevolence. I create them because they are powerful. I create them because they are cool. That is all it takes for me to change history. I’m the kind of woman who would be boring to drink with at a bar. So don’t expect to find any proper, standard, or average humanity in me. I don’t care about Princess Staivia’s situation. If she’s afraid of dying, all I can do is tell her to get more powerful. And that can be physical power or political power.”

That was the opinion of someone who had succeeded in creating something from scratch.

She was overwhelmingly correct and overwhelmingly cold.

If you put enough effort into it, you will succeed. She did not mean that as a shallow platitude. She had truly achieved that, so she could not understand the anguish of those currently struggling through it. Why can’t you succeed even though you’re putting so much effort into this? How long will you be stuck back at that stage? Are you even trying? She was the kind of person who could innocently ask those much too cruel questions.

“But…”

Claire Whist’s tone of voice changed slightly and it broke through the iciness from before.

While an intense firefight played out on the screen, a bit of the humanity she had denied not long before entered her voice.

“You said it was the Assault Signal, right? Prince Dimiksy acquired the first generation Assault Signal as a pawn for his plan.”

“Yes. The pilot Elite was assassinated while on leave in a safe country so that the Object would be removed from the battlefield.”

That was an old Object.

The model fell in the middle to later end of the first generation. In addition to the standard cannons, it had been equipped with the result of an experimental project that used powerful electromagnetic waves and various wavelengths of light to destroy the devices used in the enemy’s sensors. The experiment had been a failure. The idea only worked in theory and was completely worthless outside of the laboratory.

The design philosophy behind the Baby Magnum had been different, but it had inherited a few of the Assault Signal’s genes in its fundamental theory. It was not as deep a connection as siblings or parent and child. At most, it was like being relatives or cousins.

The Object held many memories for Claire.

It had been the first Object she had designed.

A few technologies had been rejected by the ignorant higher ups of the military for misguided reasons, but she had added them in without recording them on the official plans. When she thought back, that had been rather reckless of her.

But…

That was not the core of what she took issue with.

It was something else. Something much more important.

“…The pilot Elite. Excelsyla was a pitiable girl.” She spoke a single name. “She came from a poor family. When she was scouted as an ideal candidate for an Elite, she was overjoyed that she would finally be able to help out her parents. But she made a mistake in how much of her first paycheck she sent them. She was trying to save her parents, but she ended up destroying both their sense of

the value of money and their lives."

"…"

"People who are only able to wear first-class products are truly pathetic. Especially those whose outfits do not match the amount of money they make. Excelsyla fought hard to save her parents from their brand name addiction. The counseling lasted three years, but it never bore any fruits. She almost never took leave, but she had decided to do so that one time in order to finally give her parents the sweaters she had knitted herself."

It had all ended meaninglessly.

An Elite was a powerful asset for the nation, so even on leave, one would never be wandering around a city without bodyguards. For her to die in some ridiculous bombing, it was very likely there had been at least one enemy from Dimiksy's faction inside her bodyguard team.

Excelsyla's courage, dedication, benevolence, great effort, and small successes and fortunes had all been crushed underfoot for nothing more than the power lust of some sleazy man.

She had been roasted black.

All to acquire a pawn for some plan.

"Fine," said Claire Whist quietly as she held the game pad tighter in her hands.

A creaking noise could be heard, cracks entered the plastic device, and then it broke.

With the commands suddenly having stopped, the bearded man could only sit there and be shot to death. Claire ignored him and glared at the man from the Night Edge Platoon.

"I'm surprised to find I can still make this expression, but since these feelings have welled up within me, I'll help you. Then again, you contacted me because you knew you could use the incident with Excelsyla most effectively on me, right?" But then she added,

“There is a chance my anger could destroy your carefully laid plans from the inside. Do not forget that and make sure to hold my reins properly, okay?”

Dimiksy Nikolaschka might have been a truly excellent tactician.

He had expanded his wealth, power, equipment, and personnel by way of all sorts of wicked deeds.

But those wicked deeds could hurt him just as much as they helped him.

They could hurt him from a place he had no interest in.

Part 17

And the two idiots began a race against time.

After ending his conversation with the designer Claire, Quenser shouted to his partner.

“Heivia, get to the emergency power! Mikfa and I will cut the cables for the defense system!!”

“No fair!! I want to be the one working up a sweat with a maid!! I want to hear what a maid sounds like breathing heavily right next to me!!”

“So your vulgar talk has finally reached me as well…!!”

They complained, but they all knew they had no time. The enemy had already fired two shots. It was difficult to calculate out how much time they had left.

The two idiots headed off in different directions.

Heivia headed down a flight of stairs while Quenser and Mikfa ran across the top of the float.

“He can probably only shoot once every 7 minutes! But it’s still astounding that he can fire a battery unit into orbit, have it decelerate, and then connect it in that time!!”

“Dimiksy cannot fire containers repeatedly like a machinegun, can he?” asked Mikfa.

“The system uses extremely high temperatures to explosively expand the air. It takes time for the rapid cooling. And once it does cool, it has to take measurements to ensure the elevator’s guiderails have not been distorted. …But when you compare this to the old rockets that took days of preparation to fire, he’s still shooting his load extremely prematurely!!”

“Are you enjoying this verbal sexual harassment by any chance!?”

Quenser attached bombs to the cables coiled around all over the place that were thicker than his arm. They were much too thick to cut with any kind of blade like wire cutters.

Meanwhile, Mikfa used the strength of her powered suit to rip the cables apart while watching the Broad Sky Saber with the digital magnification of the suit.

“The base of the elevator is moving. A cylindrical part is being loaded… That is probably the container!!”

“You mean that fat old man is groping at his swollen crotch!?”

“Do you want me to punch you!? And don’t think I will hold back just because I am in a powered suit!!”

A separate building-like rectangular unit was equipped alongside the steel tower elevator. If one viewed the elevator like a gun, that was likely the magazine.

“Not good. Shit, is Heivia okay!?”

“He didn’t just flee down below on his own, did he!?”

That was when they heard gunfire.

They were already short on time, but now some soldiers presumably from Dimiksy’s faction were firing at them from behind a large passenger plane that was tilted to one side due to broken wheels.

Quenser did not hesitate to hide behind the maid (who was wearing a powered suit).

“What a pain in the ass! Why are they still alive!?”

“If they survived, they must be the unit that left with Lady Staivia. I will never forgive them!!”

The next thing Quenser knew, the maid was making a dash for the men. With his shield gone, Quenser immediately ran for cover, but he was not the only one surprised by the situation. It looked like one of the soldiers frantically tried to prepare a shoulder-fired

missile, but Mikfa's amateurish and fearless dash proved successful. She got there first.

She crossed the approximately 150 meter gap at greater than a safe driving speed and used the giant hands of the powered suit to grab a panicked flesh-and-blood soldier.

"German☆suplex!!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!? That giant weight and tremendous strength turned a sport into murder!!" screamed Quenser as he watched from the side.

Whenever Quenser had heard the term "inhumane weapon of murder", he had always laughed to himself and wondered what a humane weapon of murder would be. However, this scene taught him all too well why such a term was needed. There were many ways to die, but not many would want to die by being half-crushed like an empty can.

Having charged into the center of the team of enemy soldiers, Mikfa continued her attack. Enemy Soldier 1 (who had just started to overcome his shock) was sent flying into the side of the passenger plane with a dropkick, Enemy Soldier 2 (who had panicked and was firing meaningless bullets from his submachine gun) had his upper body turned to spray with a lariat, and Enemy Soldier 3 (who had started cursing the goddess of destiny) was turned into a stain on the ground with a body press. By the end, it was impossible to tell which soldier had been which.

The scene was so horrifying it was almost humorous.

But Quenser would have preferred to see the maid's zettai ryouiki as the skirt of her maid uniform fluttered around her. The scene was humorous, but it was not cute in the slightest. And there was no hope for it at all.

Only now that she had been thoroughly dyed in red did Mikfa realize the situation she was in.

"Honestly, that was not enough to quell my anger. All of you need

to hurry up and die!!”

“Um… Could you wash off all of that blood and guts before coming back over here…?” asked Quenser.

“Why are you looking at me like I am filthy!? I will hug you!!”

“Noooooooooooooooooooooo!! You’re all stickyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

Despite receiving the truly rare experience of being hugged by a real maid and having his face buried in her bountiful chest, Quenser let out a cry and had real tears streaming down his face. There was nothing there but tough armor and the stench of iron. And that was probably not the armor he was smelling.

“Cough!! Cough cough!! That is too horrible to pass off as a joke!! And more importantly, we need to sever all of the power cables connecting to the defense system! Ugh…peh peh!!”

After the bloody maid finally released him, Quenser scurried off to blow away the remaining cables with bombs.

“Six minutes have passed since the last container was fired!” warned Mikfa.

“We’ve silenced the defense system. Now it’s all up to Heivia!!”

That was when Quenser heard horrible static coming from his radio.

“Did we make it in time…?”

“No, we need to change the direction of the antennae! Hurry up and turn them towards the Broad Sky Saber!!”

The powered suit ran. It forcibly grabbed the van-sized object that had been staked directly into the float. The suit’s great strength forced the antennae to turn without their hydraulics.

In the next instant, something fell.

An orange beam of light struck a location further out in the ocean

from both the floating international airport and the Assault Signal floating on the ocean next to it.

“We did it! It miss-…!!”

Mikfa did not have time to finish her exclamation of joy.

Quenser did not have time to warn her of the danger. He jumped behind a large passenger plane that was lying on the surface of the float with its main wing broken.

For a few seconds nothing happened.

And then…

There was a pure white explosion.

The giant laser beam had not lasted even a second. The tremendous amount of heat it had supplied to the ocean water had evaporated all of the nearby water. That large-scale phreatic explosion was reminiscent of the old-style rocket and space shuttle launches that Quenser had seen in recordings. A white cloud-like mass quickly spread out in every direction.

It spread for hundreds of meters and maybe even further than that.

Quenser was hiding behind a broken passenger plane, but nowhere was safe. The plane that was supposed to be acting as his shield rolled over when the white wall struck it. Quenser realized he was about to be crushed, so he frantically got up and ran back from the plane as quickly as he could.

“Damn, and after we went to the trouble of saving those tiltrotors!”

The troop transport tiltrotors flying through the sky were struck down by that mass of air. But there was nothing Quenser could do. He could only hope they made a successful emergency landing on the ocean. Even if those aboard were the disagreeable honor students, he would be left with a bad taste in his mouth if they were wiped out by something like that.

And then Quenser spotted something out of the corner of his eye. It

was a powered suit rolling across the float after being ripped away from the antenna equipment.

He had no idea if his voice would make it through the storm, but he shouted anyway.

“Get out of the powered suit!! If you fall into the ocean, there’s no hope for-…!!”

He trailed off. As soon as he breathed in, a burning pain filled his throat. Quenser immediately stopped breathing, but the burns were already spreading. He grasped at his throat with his hands and writhed around, but the pain would not go away.

“Cough!! Cough cough!!”

He had only breathed in a small bit of the hot wind, so his throat had only been slightly burned. If it had made it to his lungs, he would have been having trouble breathing.

That was when he heard a dull reverberating noise.

The Broad Sky Saber which had been sitting still in the distance now began to move.

Dimiksy may have been mad about having his strike turned aside.

No, that was not it.

(The cannons on the front of the Object are only meant to hold an enemy in place. They may be enough to wear down the enemy’s armor, but they aren’t powerful enough to pierce the cockpit! That means he has no choice but to use the sky saber if he wants to kill Princess Staivia to ensure his spot on the throne!!)

In that case, he would focus on destroying the ECM equipment that was jamming him.

But even if Quenser knew that, he had no means of stopping that giant machine that could move at around 500 kph. As Quenser helplessly watched the Broad Sky Saber approach the float, the Object first used its six cannons to fire on the Assault Signal.

The maid Mikfa was about to fall from the float, but she let out a shrill voice with no concern for herself.

“Lady Staivia!!”

“You idiot! He’s targeting you! If he could kill her with that, he wouldn’t have bothered with that over-the-top sky saber!!”

Fragments of armor melted off from the Assault Signal and with an explosive roar that was similar to a shockwave rained down from above. Normally thinking, Quenser could not risk moving from behind the broken passenger plane.

But if he did nothing, Mikfa would be caught in the blast next to the ECM equipment.

Even if she was not blown away, armor and all, she would definitely be knocked off the float and into the ocean.

Quenser was conflicted, but then he realized he did not have time to be conflicted.

He made his decision.

(Dammit. If I’m likely to die either way, I’ll choose the path I can brag about in a bar if I survive!!)

While crouching down, Quenser ran as quickly as he could through the downpour of armor fragments. When he saw a red, hot fragment fall right next to him and scatter orange sparks everywhere, he seriously thought he was going to cry. However, stopping now would not make him any safer. He continued to run towards Mikfa in her powered suit.

But he did not make it in time.

After that test shot told Dimiksy he truly could not kill Staivia with those cannons, he turned his countless cannons in a different direction. He turned them towards the ECM equipment set up on various parts of the float.

He fired on them one at a time.

The Object's cannons thoroughly melted and blew away each piece of ECM equipment. Mikfa who was nearby and even Quenser who was trying to approach her were swept away too.

They had not been hit by the shockwave.

The float had begun to rock horribly.

A tremendous vibration created an unsteadiness beneath their feet as if they were on a suspension bridge that was having its ropes cut one at a time.

Quenser shouted through the sauna-like heat loud enough that the explosive noise would not drown him out.

"Mikfa!! Use the emergency eject!! Pull the levers in the wrists simultaneously! Activate it before you fall into the ocean!!"

He received no response. He saw no sign she was trying to exit the powered suit. She was merely tossed around by the impact as she rolled toward the edge of the float. Had Quenser's voice not reached her? Had she panicked too much to carry out that simple operation? Or was she too afraid of the tremendous impacts to leave the suit?

Whatever the reason, only one path remained for her if she fell into the ocean while still inside.

Quenser used his scratched hands to struggle to his feet and began running once more.

The Broad Sky Saber may have been focusing on destroying the ECM equipment because it made no follow up attacks on the powered suit. The attacks continued on the equipment.

"Shit!!"

Quenser finally made it to the powered suit. If he carelessly approached Mikfa's giant rolling form, he could be crushed. Quenser lifted up one of the thick cables coiled around the float surface and used it to catch on and decelerate the rolling powered suit.

The bombardment from the Broad Sky Saber continued.

It was supposedly focusing its attack on the ECM equipment, but the side effects of that made great changes to the buoyancy of the float. The powered suit had supposedly been stopped, but the float tilted and it started sliding towards the ocean once more.

Quenser had no time.

As the float was rocked like a ship in a storm, he grabbed onto the armor of the powered suit.

(Shit, can you force an eject from outside!?)

The powered suit was a collection of delicate equipment and programs, so it was made to not open from the outside if it was locked from the inside. This was simply to prevent an enemy from opening it.

But there were a few exceptions.

(If the pilot has been injured too badly to operate it or has lost consciousness, the maintenance workers need a way to open it.)

While looking at his handheld device, Quenser pulled out a Hand Axe plastic explosive and attached it to the back of the powered suit. He attached a fuse shaped like a ballpoint pen and moved away from Mikfa as she continued to slide. Since he had no idea what state the jamming was in, Quenser chose a timed fuse rather than a wireless one.

After precisely 10 seconds, it detonated.

Just as Quenser had planned, a portion of the armor on the powered suit's back came off.

Quenser climbed back up on the suit, used both hands to grab at a lever through the armor, and used his full weight to force it back.

The lever finally pulled with the feeling of some kind of stopper coming out. The rear hatch opened and the maid Mikfa rolled out.

The tilt of the float increased even further.

The empty powered suit, Quenser, and Mikfa fell off and into the ocean. Mikfa still had no idea what was happening, so Quenser grabbed her arms and somehow managed to pull them both up to the surface with only his legs.

If he had been just a dozen or so seconds later in getting that hatch opened, Mikfa would have sunk down to the bottom of the ocean along with the powered suit. Even if she had ejected then, her breath would not have lasted until she made it to the surface and she would have fallen victim to decompression sickness if she tried to rush her ascent.

“Cough! Cough cough!!”

With their faces above the surface, Quenser and Mikfa greedily gulped in oxygen. Quenser’s military uniform was bad enough, but Mikfa’s maid uniform grew very heavy as it soaked up the water. Pieces of wreckage from the exterior to the ECM equipment were floating nearby, so they grabbed onto a suitcase-sized fragment as a float.

As the bandages wrapped around Mikfa’s fingers grew wet with seawater, a dark red liquid seeped out.

“…Are you okay? It must be bad to be thrown into the ocean after being tortured.”

“L-Lady Staivia is more important.” Her voice was frail, but Mikfa was more worried about the princess still up on the cutting board than herself. “The ECM equipment was destroyed! The shield protecting Lady Staivia is gone! At this rate, the sky saber will hit her with its next strike!!”

As Mikfa lamented, they saw a brilliant white flash of light and a container was fired vertically from the elevator on the back of the Broad Sky Saber.

The countdown had begun until the sky saber fired.

They had only 7 minutes.

Part 18

Sogia and the others from Unicorn ran through the remains of the 5 square kilometers of Flightburg Air Force Base that had been almost entirely destroyed. Almost all of the buildings had crumbled and it was no longer immediately obvious what each facility had been. They travelled across the rubble while keeping the layout in their heads.

The Achilles' heel to Dimiksy Nikolaschka and his Broad Sky Saber was somewhere there.

They had no idea what it was or what role it played, but there was definitely something there.

It may have seemed they had no hint whatsoever, but they had a rough guess.

"The royal Nikolaschka family was heavily involved in the construction of the Object, but what unit handled its maintenance and operation? Is there some other maintenance battalion with around 1000 members? No, that would have shown up in our information network somewhere. They can't completely hide a unit that large."

"So you're saying they took personnel and equipment directly from Flightburg?"

"If so, there should still be spare parts and maintenance information for the Broad Sky Saber here!!"

"So Dimiksy bombarded the air force base because he determined we could find a weakness from that, hm?"

Dimiksy had to have been able to make a decent guess as to where the weakness of his lay hidden.

And yet he had fired his sky saber at the runway in the very center of the base.

He may have been trying to show off his ability to blow away the entire base with just that one shot, but Sogia guessed there was some other reason behind it.

If he had fired directly at his target, there was a slight risk they could have searched that area and found a hint in some melted equipment.

Dimiksy had caused more general destruction of the base because he was afraid of that possibility.

He did not want to tell anyone what he was specifically targeting.

People who plotted out detailed conspiracies were bold yet cowardly at the same time. And so he had imagined many different possibilities and acted to crush them all ahead of time.

“Let’s approach this third generation Object from both the information and material angles. We need to split up. One group will search for information from the server in the control and communications facility and the other will dig up any materials they can find in the row of giant hangers.”

Sogia and Sanya went for the information while Mars and Flat went for the materials.

Both groups ran through the rubble along with the Unicorn subordinates who had survived the large-scale bombardment.

The resistance from Flightburg Air Force Base had completely stopped. It had either been wiped out by the bombardment or the destruction of the base by their supposed ally led the men to realize there was no escape for them even if they won.

Unicorn naturally intended to neutralize any soldiers that could move, but it appeared they need not continue the meaningless battle for the meantime.

The burning power had disappeared from the surrounding air, but it was still absurdly hot. It was worse than crossing a desert. An open outdoor area should never have been that hot.

Sogia drank some saline that was originally meant as a substitute for a blood transfusion. Normal water lacked electrolytes, so he would have definitely come down with heatstroke otherwise.

“Damn, this place is a sauna. I’ve made my way through plenty of battlefields, but it isn’t normal for the act of walking to feel like it’s wearing down your lifespan.”

“This heat makes me want some coffee milk. And did you notice the clouds that have started to cover the sky around here? They’re moving in really fast.”

“Did the sudden change in temperature mess up the atmospheric pressure or something? Well, I could go for a gift from god right about now. I want something to cool everything down.”

“This might be a meteorological weapon that ignores the normal weather patterns. This could be an attempt to wash away our precious hint in a concentrated downpour.”

The control and communications facility was supposed to be a giant tower, but Sogia and the others only saw a flat pile of rubble spread out before their eyes. It was impossible to tell where anything had been.

“This is too much to dig up by hand. It would be faster to check for any usable heavy machinery or powered suits.”

One section of the defense industry created sturdier versions of existing construction equipment such as tractors and cranes. There was more to war than just the spectacular firefights seen in movies. And even 4WD off-road vehicles often had small winches or cranes on them despite not being specialized for those uses.

“There’s a tank with a blade like a bulldozer. It’s probably meant for clearing anti-personnel mines.”

That had been constructed based on the extremely rough idea of clearing a path through a dangerous minefield by blowing up the mines. Sanya got into the front driver’s seat and Sogia sat in the commander’s seat on the turret.

They managed to clear the surrounding rubble away despite some trouble due to the blade's low range of motion.

Finally, an area spewing orange sparks was uncovered.

"There we go. The main power cable is making quite the commotion."

"…Let's get this over with before it starts raining. If this area gets wet, I doubt we will be able to do anything."

After getting out of the tank and clearing some smaller rubble, they found a mass of plastic that looked like it had melted and then re-solidified. They saw a circuit board sticking out through a gap. It was unclear if the board had any power running to it, but the capacitors would have power stored for a set amount of time. Touching it still held the risk of blowing off a finger.

"I don't see how this could still run. Not to mention that every single monitor has been destroyed."

"I don't care if it's partial or corrupted data; we need to get everything out of this we can. It's the same Legitimacy Kingdom format, so it should be easier than if this was an enemy nation's system."

Sanya connected a cable from her handheld device and began extracting data, but then Sogia and the others heard the rumbling of thunder overhead.

They looked up to find the sky already covered by dark storm clouds.

It could start pouring at any moment.

"Are you done yet!?"

"This is a huge amount of information! This isn't some hard disk recorder bought at an extreme discount!!"

"If it starts to rain, an electric current on the level of a train's overhead line will be scattered all over this area. Hurry!"

“Unfortunately, my handheld device didn’t come with the option that makes it work faster when you yell at it!”

That was when a Sogia felt something lukewarm land on his head.

It was the “gift from god” that he had been hoping for within that scorching hell.

And yet he grimaced and grabbed Sanya’s shoulder.

“Time’s up!”

“Just a bit longer!!”

“Do you want to be burned to a crisp like you’re being cooked on an iron plate by someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing!? We’re getting out of here!!”

Sogia forcibly dragged Sanya away from the remains of the server. The cable from her handheld device stretched to its limit and then popped out of the connector. They moved away as quickly as they could manage.

And in the next instant, the rain came down like someone had overturned a bucket.

A bluish-white explosion erupted with the melted remains of the server in the center.

“That was close!!”

“Oh, come on. I’m not sure I even got 1% of it!”

The area had grown dark due to the storm clouds that had appeared and Sogia could see a pale bluish-white light at the peaks of the piles of rubble.

(St. Elmo’s fire…a coronal discharge. Shit. The weather worsened so quickly the entire area has begun to electrify.)

Lightning could strike at any moment, but he did not have time to be constantly worrying about the weather.

“It would have been impossible to take in all of the data from such a large server in the first place. More importantly, Sanya, can you read any of the data you did get?”

“It’s mostly destroyed. I can’t even open the files. It’s at a level where the software doesn’t even recognize it.”

“Convert it to binary data and then run some recovery software to try to fill in the holes. We might at least get a broad outline of the data pattern.”

Sanya did as instructed and the data was finally converted into something readable.

About half the text was corrupted, the images were in complete disarray, and the color scheme was a psychedelic mess of primary colors, but they could at least guess what kind of file it was from the portions that were just barely readable.

“This is a maintenance file for the Broad Sky Saber.”

“What a shame. There had to be some schematics in that server…”

“If this is a file for maintenance rather than a schematic, it would only have data on the main Object on the land. It wouldn’t need data on the main cannon unit up in orbit.”

“Is this what Dimiksy wanted to eliminate?”

“I don’t know. But we have no choice but to read through it.”

But then Sogia’s radio let out an electronic tone.

He received a transmission from Mars who had gone to look for the physical equipment.

“We found a few spares for the cannons and armor. They are parts for an Object, so even burying them under rubble wasn’t enough to completely destroy them!”

“Have you found anything that could be Dimiksy’s weakness?”

“Nothing yet. But we did find a sturdy container in the hangar rubble. It looks more like a gigantic mobile safe than it does a container. Flat is trying to overheat the electronic lock to get inside, but it’s possible some emergency lock will activate if the security notices his attempts. Have you found any data on what might be inside!?”

Sanya shook her head.

It was not that she had not found anything special.

It was quite the opposite.

“This is a cutting edge Object that is said to be part of the third generation. Everything about it is filled with classified information and is therefore highly valuable. It could be almost anything.”

“Mars, how big is the container? Let’s make a list of all the parts that could fit inside.”

“Um…It’s a cube with about 5 meter sides. It’s probably the kind of container meant to be carried on a cargo plane instead of a ship.”

“5 meters. What could be in there?”

“Just a quick glance shows over 200 possibilities,” replied Sanya.

“Oh, he did it! It’s open! It’s open! Nice job, Flat! The contents are…the hell is this?”

“Mars, report! If you really don’t know, use your handheld device’s camera to send an image!”

“It’s an ultraviolet signal.” Mars must have grabbed some kind of equipment because a hard clanking sound could be heard over the radio. “It’s a powerful ultraviolet signal that uses a program to send out a blinking pattern like Morse code! My guess is it’s a safety device to prevent allies from being hit by the orbital bombardment!”

Part 19

Meanwhile, Heivia Winchell was very seriously about to die in the underground portion of the float as it began to sink, but no one seemed to care.

“Cough cough!! Th-this is not what is supposed to happen to the star!! Cough, cough! Where is today’s beautiful woman!?”

Heivia finally gave up on running and started swimming through the passageway that was half-filled with water as he headed for the exit. However, the float was sinking at a tremendous rate and the space filled with air was rapidly decreasing. On top of that, the water was flowing into the float through the exit, so Heivia had to fight the current the entire way. He simply was not going to reach the exit.

But the goddess of destiny did smile on him on occasion. (Even if it was a horribly cynical smile.)

With a deep rumble, cracks suddenly began running along the wall next to him. Heivia prepared himself for the flooding to grow even worse, but the situation went well beyond that.

The several kilometers long float was unable to withstand the bombardment of the Broad Sky Saber targeting the ECM equipment, so about a third of it broke off.

Heivia happened to be right along that crack, so he was tossed and spun around by large quantities of seawater. The next thing he knew, he had been dumped into the ocean outside of the float.

The third that had broken off lost its balance and headed for the ocean floor.

Heivia headed for the surface while feeling truly grateful that he was not still stuck inside the float. Due to being suddenly thrown out, he had little oxygen left in his mouth.

His head started to pound painfully due to lack of oxygen, but he somehow managed to breach the surface.

“Bhahh! What the hell!? I finally get some air and it’s as hot as a sauna!!”

He flipped past all the wreckage floating in the water and approached Quenser.

“Hey, Heivia. In a bad mood? There’s a maid here waiting for you.”

“Thanks, knight! This is perfect timing. It’s like that first salt butter ramen after returning from being stranded in a snowy mountain! Its value shoots up! And it really soothes you!!”

“…I get the feeling I am being tormented in your inappropriate imaginations.”

Mikfa glared at the two idiots like she was looking at wild beasts, but the two did not attempt to argue as she was not exactly wrong. For boys of the Legitimacy Kingdom, about half of what came to mind upon hearing the word “maid” was highly inappropriate.

“Anyway, Heivia. You have a grenade launcher, right?”

“And what are you hoping to shoot it at!? It isn’t going to do a thing to that third generation cutting edge weapon!”

“I don’t want an explosive. When we were rescuing Mikfa, you said most of your grenades are signal markers used to pass targeting data to an Object. That’s what I need. Do you have any ultraviolet markers?”

“I do, but who are you hoping to contact?”

Quenser snatched the assault rifle away from Heivia and stuck an ultraviolet marker round into the grenade launcher attached to the bottom of the barrel.

But…

“Eh, what!? A rifle is this heavy!? I can’t tread water while…

gbghbg!!”

“Ha ha ha!! What are you doing, Quenser? Are you trying to kill yourself!?”

“Oh, honestly!!”

The maid Mikfa had completely bristled with irritation and she frantically dived down into the ocean. She dragged up Quenser who had begun to sink and made him grab onto the piece of wreckage she had been using as a float.

“Lady Staivia’s life is on the line! Leave your gags for later!!”

“Cough…H-hey, Heivia. Receiving verbal abuse from a maid is a pretty rare experience, don’t you think?”

“I experienced that every day of my life back in the home country.”

Heivia looked puzzled, but then he noticed something.

As Quenser leaned his upper body up on the piece of wreckage, he aimed the grenade launcher at Staivia’s Assault Signal rather than the Broad Sky Saber.

“Wait, what!? Don’t tell me you’ve gone over to Dimiksy’s side after all this!”

“I haven’t.”

Quenser pulled the trigger and fired the ultraviolet marker. A mass about the size of a can of coffee flew through the air like a long throw in baseball before a small parachute opened.

“Hey, Heivia. Don’t you think the Broad Sky Saber has a really annoying design?”

“What?”

Heivia looked confused.

Quenser removed the empty cartridge and loaded another

ultraviolet marker.

“It has the main body on the surface and the main cannon up in orbit. At first glance, it really does look like a weapon with a new design. But it must suck having to send energy up into space for each shot. They could have just put a JPlevelMHD reactor directly on the orbital main cannon. …And yet Dimiksy didn’t do that. Why not?”

“Well…”

Heivia thought while he watched Quenser fire another grenade into the air. This time, Quenser fired the ultraviolet marker out towards empty air rather than the Assault Signal.

“Dimiksy had this Object prepared for the Royal Duel, right? Well, the rules require him to be here. An Object in orbit would be deemed against the rules,” said Heivia.

“There is that, yes. But they also could have had the main body on the surface but given the orbital main cannon its own reactor. No rule says an Object can have only one reactor. We even fought the Tri-Core which had three. But Dimiksy didn’t do that. If he only needed a few seconds between shots with that laser, he would already have defeated Princess Staivia. Hell, he could probably take over the world with something like that. So why didn’t he?”

“…Are you trying to say he had a reason other than the development costs?”

“It’s a simple issue.” Quenser fired ultraviolet marker after ultraviolet marker as he spoke. “Dimiksy has obtained the ultimate weapon. But he is afraid of the power he has created. If he put someone in the orbital sky saber to fire it for him, they could betray him. And even if he left it completely automated, it’s possible someone could hack in and have it shoot Dimiksy himself. And so he did not want to create a perfect system that allowed the orbital main cannon to be fired on its own.”

“So the roundabout energy transfer system is a sort of safety feature? Even if someone takes it over, he does not have to worry

about it going out of control or betraying him because it does not have the energy needed to fire? Dimiksy made sure he holds the final key by providing the energy for each shot individually?"

"Dimiksy is bold yet cowardly, so he will have prepared several safety features." After placing several ultraviolet markers throughout the sky with parachutes, Quenser gave a satisfied smile. "For example, an emergency targeting evasion system. I just received word from Unicorn at Flightburg Air Force Base. Dimiksy's sky saber has an isolated emergency targeting evasion system that prevents an attack on the coordinates emitting a special signal from an ultraviolet marker. Even if the sky saber has been taken over by a hacker, it supposedly cannot fire on those coordinates. That way he cannot be stabbed by his own sword even if it is stolen from him. And in case the firing cancellation process can't kick in fast enough, it automatically moves its aim to a location away from the marker."

Some static then came from Quenser's radio.

An unfamiliar deep male voice came through.

"This is Unicorn calling our beloved friend. I will transmit the ultraviolet marker signal pattern verbally. Don't input it wrong."

"I'm thankful for your help, but I'm still going to kick you in the balls later."

Quenser inputted the number he was given into his radio and the powerful ultraviolet lights floating on parachutes began blinking in a set pattern. That blinking light that human eyes could not see made its way all the way up to the weapon in orbit.

The Broad Sky Saber's camera lenses all audibly moved. It seemed to be only once those ultraviolet signals were sent out that it realized what those things floating around the area were.

"It's too late!! The emergency targeting evasion system will automatically re-input the targeting information to 'safely avoid its allies'. You scattered the seeds, so it's time your own sword stabbed you right in the ass!!"

“Wait, it isn’t just avoiding us? Have you guided it so it targets the Broad Sky Saber!?”

Once Heivia finally caught on to Quenser’s plan, he was dumbfounded.

But then he realized something.

“But that won’t work! The Broad Sky Saber has its own ultraviolet light! No matter how many of those markers you scatter around, it will never misfire on that third generation!!”

“Not necessarily.”

Quenser gave Heivia his assault rifle back and pointed toward the Broad Sky Saber with his right hand in the shape of a gun.

More specifically, he pointed toward the top of the laser space elevator tower on the back of the spherical main body.

“I said I received information from Unicorn, remember? According to the maintenance diagrams, its ultraviolet light is set at the top of that tower. Dimiksy had it hurriedly added later on to keep as few people as possible in the know about his weakness. It seems he did manage to keep it a secret, but it isn’t very durable.”

That was when Heivia saw it.

Vague bluish-white lights were flickering off the tips of the cannons extending from the spherical main body of the Broad Sky Saber. No, it was not just the cannons. The end of every single protrusion was glowing. And this naturally included the steel tower of the elevator.

“St. Elmo’s fire. It’s a type of coronal discharge created when the area is electrified. Unicorn saw this phenomenon at Flightburg Air Force Base after the bombardment from the sky saber. And just after they saw the St. Elmo’s fire, lightning began striking all over the place!”

The seven minutes of preparation time before the sky saber fired were almost completely gone.

In the next moment…

With a brilliant flash of light, a bluish-white lightning strike stabbed straight into the laser space elevator tower. A great roar ripped through the air and orange sparks scattered around like a high voltage power line had been ripped apart.

Mikfa cowered down, but Quenser had a fearless grin on his face.

“The coronal discharge of St. Elmo’s fire acts like a lightning rod. And what is the tallest thing on this battlefield? That should tell you where the lightning will fall!!”

And if the Broad Sky Saber's ultraviolet light stopped working even temporarily, how would the sky saber view it?

The combat area was crammed full of ultraviolet markers giving off signals telling it not to attack there.

And there was a single wide open point in the middle of it all.

The sky saber obeyed its programming and unhesitatingly fired on

the Broad Sky Saber.

A great explosive noise rang out.

It seemed the Broad Sky Saber tried to take immediate evasive action, but it did not escape unscathed.

The high power laser fired by the sky saber grazed the elevator tower, twisted it, and ripped it from the Object's spherical main body. Orange light gathered in the wreckage of the tower floating in the air.

"Heivia! Dive down!!"

Quenser grabbed Mikfa's collar and forced her head underwater.

Immediately afterwards, the superheated air began to explosively expand. It happened at such high speed that walls of air that were like shockwaves scattered in every direction.

The destruction swallowed up everything within a few kilometers of the Object.

The water must have cushioned them because Quenser and the others were just barely saved from both the shockwave and scorching wind.

But the seawater had been shaken up by the explosion, so they still felt dull pain across their entire bodies like they had been stuffed into a metal drum which was beaten with a metal bat.

"Bhahh!!"

Quenser frantically brought his head above water, but the air was horribly dry. He felt like he had been thrown into a sauna and his throat stung as he breathed in.

Heivia who had also somehow survived shouted out, "What happened to the Broad Sky Saber!?"

"It should have been heavily damaged, but-…!!"

It had lost its laser space elevator, but it had not sunk.

Due to having that elevator tower attached, the Broad Sky Saber's normal center of gravity was located quite high up. Naturally, having the tower torn away would greatly change that location.

Normally, it would have easily capsized in this situation.

But the Broad Sky Saber had withstood it.

It could no longer move at high speed, but it was still just barely keeping its balance like someone on a tightrope.

And as it balanced, the Broad Sky Saber turned its six large cannons toward the Assault Signal. It fired again and again, but it could not destroy the Assault Signal since they were not main cannons.

And without the elevator, it could no longer send energy to the sky saber.

"Did…did we win?"

"Staivia did. But he can still fire on us in revenge!!"

The strike from the sky saber had caused some large waves. But it was unlikely to be enough to make the Broad Sky Saber miss. An Object was not such a simple weapon.

Its cannons aimed accurately.

The aiming lenses repeatedly zoomed in and out like the Object was glaring at Quenser and the others.

They had no hope of winning.

They did not have enough firepower to blow away an Object, so they could only wait for the attack to come.

And no matter what attack it was, the Object would blow them to pieces.

"…Did you really think I hadn't thought this through?"

But…

Quenser alone continued to smile.

It was possible even Dimiksy had lost his smile and his features were now twisted in anger.

“I didn’t just interfere with the sky saber to cause some friendly fire. If I created such a tremendous result, you would mistakenly believe that was what I was after. You relaxed because you thought the attack was over. That is why you overlooked it. …You overlooked the other thing I set up. You overlooked my other reason to scatter all those ultraviolet markers.”

He brought his thumb to the button on his radio.

Heivia had seen that motion many times before. It was what Quenser always did when blowing something up with Hand Axe plastic explosives.

But he had a different reason this time.

He had not set up any explosives. And his thumb was continually pressing the button in a set pattern.

And something was emitting that pattern at the same time.

The ultraviolet markers floating above the ocean. He had originally used them to send a signal to the sky saber in orbit, but Quenser continued to send out a blinking pattern even after that was over.

From the beginning, the sky saber had not been his only target.

He was using those ultraviolet markers to send a signal to some other place as well.

But where?

“We got some help from a top ranking Legitimacy Kingdom Object designer. And we have an Object she designed.”

“The Assault Signal?”

“And the Assault Signal had a few pieces of technology added in that were never recorded on the official diagrams. Dimiksy’s faction only checked the database, so they wouldn’t have known. And one of those features can be activated at any time if it receives a specific signal.”

The supposedly stationary Object.

The Assault Signal.

It was a remote control system originally meant to be used to slowly regain balance if the pilot Elite lost consciousness.

Quenser opened that point of contact and used his radio to contact a tropical island.

“Calling our beloved comrade in arms. If you want a medal, I’ll give you one.”

Claire Whist sat in the vending machine corner of the research facility on the Cook Additions Islands. A cable running from the laptop on the floor was connected to some giant device.

It normally sat in the corner of her room as a complexly folded piece of plastic.

The remote control system she had once created to protect the pilot Elite named Excelsyla was unfolded around her like a huge control console for a giant robot game.

Normally, the remote control method required a few dozen to over a hundred personnel to simply right the Object.

There was simply no way it could keep up with the high speed battles between Objects.

But…

In the Amazon district, the Broad Sky Saber’s center of gravity had been thrown off due to the loss of its elevator tower. It could no

longer move and its remaining cannons did not have the firepower to destroy the Assault Signal.

In other words…

Claire may have been an amateur at controlling an Object and she may have had to painstakingly check each command before inputing it, but she could still fire the main cannon and blow away Dimiksy Nikolaschka.

"…Excelsyla," muttered Claire as she operated a control-column-like lever with one hand and brought her index finger to a trigger-like button.

Her expression looked somehow lonely but it also displayed a clear smile.

"Do not worry. I may not have been able to protect you, but I can at least protect your dignity."

And…

On a battlefield thousands of kilometers away, a shot that would change history was fired.

Dimiksy Nikolaschka may not have been able to comprehend what happened in that instant. Or perhaps he had but was unable to escape the danger due to the elevator tower having been destroyed.

The result was the same either way.

The Assault Signal's main cannon emitted a tremendous beam of light and explosive roar. Dimiksy had clearly made a mistake when he made sure the enemy Object was properly maintained in order to avoid any complaints about the fairness of the Royal Duel.

The right side of the unmoving third generation Object was mercilessly pierced by the beam of a low-stability plasma cannon.

The beam dug deeply into the thick armor. The internal systems

must have been destroyed because the Broad Sky Saber completely lost its ability to just barely remain floating. The giant weapon tilted to the side and began sinking into the ocean.

And Quenser and the others let out a cry.

But this was not a cry of victory.

They thought they were going blind.

“Gyaaahhh!! This is the problem with having your enemy and ally be Objects!!”

“Quenseeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrr!! If you knew our ally was going to fire, you need to stop trying to act cool and actually tell us!! Then I could have searched around for some protective glass meant for viewing melted steel!!”

Dimiksy struggled, but the ocean coolly swallowed up that giant weapon as if that power-hungry man was being dragged down into the depths of hell.

With his eyes still hurting, Quenser snapped his fingers and said, “Heh. That third generation may have been a truly powerful Object, but people seem to forget that every Object is a true monster. You can’t underestimate any of them.”

Just as he had finished everything off while looking cool, Mikfa chimed in.

“So how do you suggest we avoid this giant wave approaching from where he sank?”

“Waahhh!!!???”

Part 20

After Sogia heard over the radio about the destruction of the Broad Sky Saber and the result of the Royal Duel, he sat on some of the rubble that had once been Flightburg Air Force Base and put a thick cigar in his mouth.

"…It won't light. And there was fire everywhere not too long ago."

The artificial downpour was still continuing, so he was having trouble getting his lighter to light.

When Sanya saw that, she grinned and said, "Is this any time to be smoking? That hard-ass will likely be here soon. He'll definitely be able to notice if you do it right before he gets here."

"I just want one smoke before having to face him."

But Sogia's modest wish was not granted.

They heard the sound of blades beating the air. They looked up to see a large transport helicopter approaching. Sogia gave an arbitrary sign with the unlit cigar and Mars and Flat lit a smoke bomb at an area relatively free of rubble.

The large helicopter landed there.

A figure stepped off while surrounded by several bodyguards. Sogia recognized the man.

He had been their superior back when they had still been known as the 115th Private Royal Guard Company.

"What's this? The marshal of the royal guards went out of his way to see us?"

"Your face may have changed, but I see your impudence has not."

The old man known as a marshal snapped his fingers and one of his bodyguards pulled out a vacuum packed cigar, quickly lit it, and

handed it to Sogia.

“Heh. You idiot. So you even remembered that.”

Sogia complained, but he smoked the cigar with a satisfied expression.

The marshal said, “Dimiksy Nikolaschka is confirmed to have sunk. This will cause a great shock to his faction that is squirming under the surface. We are following that movement to arrest all of them.”

“I see.”

“The Broad Sky Saber’s main cannon up in orbit has stopped functioning. A unit has been sent from the moon to retrieve it. They have attached an additional booster and are going to use the large mass of an asteroid that happens to be approaching to alter its orbit. …Space has no territorial rights, so other world powers could try to steal the technology otherwise.”

“So you don’t want a rapid change to the era due to the appearance of the third generation? …Heh. That’s exactly what Claire Whist had a ‘bad feeling’ would happen.”

“For now at least.”

When Sogia heard the marshal’s words, he disinterestedly asked, “So what about Dimiksy himself?”

“When the outsiders mixed into the Lineage Department were eliminated, it became clear his DNA information was fraudulent. But it is not up to a single soldier to decide whether that information should be made public. It is unclear if Dimiksy survived, but it is possible the military will decide to not rescue him and let him die.”

“If that happens, he’ll be known as a courageous royal who died in a Royal Duel, won’t he?” Sogia breathed out a bit of smoke. “Both the royal Nikolaschka family and the Legitimacy Kingdom as a whole would prefer that outcome. He was a dangerous man with questionable lineage who spread belligerent conspiracies everywhere. It wouldn’t surprise me if you all wanted him purged.

You were hoping we would succeed, weren't you?"

"Are you dissatisfied?"

"It doesn't matter to me. …As long as that crybaby is safe."

From the beginning, Sogia, Sanya, Mars, Flat, and the rest of Unicorn had not been trying to defeat a powerful enemy and ensure Staivia Nikolaschka became queen.

They had been trying to protect her from the problems surrounding the succession.

To keep her safe, they would have readily kept her out of the competition altogether.

If Staivia herself had truly wanted the throne, Unicorn may have even fought against Staivia.

But then…

It was because she had so little of such selfishness that Unicorn had decided to risk their lives for her in the first place.

The old man known as a marshal looked down at Sogia who sat on the rubble.

"What you all did was most likely right. At the very least, I can proudly tell you it was. But…" The old man made a clear pause. "You still broke countless military regulations from the moment you faked the destruction of the 115th Private Royal Guard Company. According to Legitimacy Kingdom law, it is not a crime to kill those who have betrayed the royals. In fact, it might earn you a medal. However, your preparations were much too dirty. For that, I must go against my personal feelings and give you an impartial court martial. Your crimes will likely outweigh what you have earned by stopping the traitors."

Sogia gave a small smile while shaking his fingers slightly to knock ashes off the tip of the cigar.

"Did you really think we weren't prepared for this from the

beginning?"

"I cannot avoid sending you to the detention barracks."

"What else is new? We were thrown in there all the time back when we were with the royal guards," said Sogia casually before shouting to the others from Unicorn. "Did you hear that, men? The marshal's going to show us to a hotel being paid for by the people's tax money!"

"As long as it has proper food, I don't care where I end up!"

"If you're fed luxurious food in a cell, shouldn't you start to worry? That sounds like a last meal before execution to me."

"Even if it's covered by bars, as long as it has a window, I can use pieces of our rations to lure in pigeons. I'll catch food enough for everyone."

As the members of Unicorn started making a commotion, the marshal grimaced slightly. Punishments were meaningless for those who knew no fear.

The marshal ordered his bodyguard unit to restrain Unicorn. But they did not handcuff the prisoners or even point their guns at them. A clear sense of respect floated in the air. Talk of this would likely fill bars for many weeks to come.

While sincerely hoping no idiots would try to emulate Unicorn's actions, the marshal asked, "I will hold you on my authority until the court martial. Are you sure you do not want to meet Princess Staivia before then?"

"Don't be stupid. This is the kind of situation where you have to leave without saying a word."

"I thought you would say that." A malicious smile appeared on the marshal's grim face. "That is why I ordered to have Princess Staivia brought here."

"What!? Damn you, old man!!"

Sogia frantically shouted out, but it was too late.

An off-road vehicle protected by several bodyguard vehicles entered the air force base. The maid Mikfa got out first. She opened the back door and Staivia Nikolaschka stepped out. When they had last seen her, she had been smaller than her stuffed bear, but she had grown quite ladylike in the past 3 years.

Without waiting for Mikfa to hold out an umbrella, Staivia ran straight toward them.

The first thing she said was, “Hm? Hmm? Which one is Yulenzak!?”

“…Oh, right. We all got plastic surgery.”

He could not disobey an order from a royal, so the man using the fake name of Sogia raised his hand.

With her target set, Staivia ran straight toward him.

They all assumed she was going to embrace him.

But Staivia used all her strength to kick Sogia (aka Yulenzak) in the crotch.

With a great noise, that large man who had fought on countless battlefields doubled over. Mars and Flat let out screams, Sanya grimaced despite being a woman, and the old man with the rank of marshal averted his gaze slightly.

As Yulenzak used all his strength to withstand the pain, he saw something unpleasant out of the corner of his eye.

The two idiots Unicorn had made excessive use of were waiting within the off-road vehicle Staivia had arrived in. They were sticking out their tongues and one of them had even warned he would kick Sogia in the balls.

(Those bastards…!!)

After completely ruining the moment, Staivia finally embraced him. He could do nothing about the intense pain swirling around within

him, but he noticed that Staivia was trembling. When he realized she was crying, Yulenzak finally scratched at his head.

Those tears were not simply from all the fear of having her life targeted for so long.

Her tear glands were reacting to being reunited with the unit…no, with the comrades she had thought she had lost 3 years ago.

There was a lot Yulenzak wanted to say, but he did not have time.

Whatever their goal had been, Unicorn had constantly broken military regulations. They had to be punished.

And so Yulenzak grabbed Staivia's shoulders, pushed her away from him, kneeled down to put himself at eye level with her, and spoke the following words:

"Hey, baby. How long are you going to keep crying? It's about time you smiled."

Epilogue

At first glance, it appeared that all the loose ends had been tied up.

But what ultimately happened to Quenser and Heivia?

“Yawn… The Japanese really know how to smoke.”

In an officer’s room in the maintenance base zone created from the over 100 large vehicles making up the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, Froleytia Capistrano held a narrow Japanese kiseru in her mouth.

She wondered what those two idiots were up to at that moment.

It seemed their pilot Elite known as the princess was very interested in their whereabouts, but Froleytia herself was not too concerned about it.

To be honest, she felt she had overworked them.

She had claimed to be punishing them, but she honestly felt anywhere else would feel like heaven compared to constant battles against Objects. One of them wished to gain Object maintenance skills on the battlefield and the other wished to accomplish heroic deeds befitting of a noble. They would still be able to accomplish those things, so sending them away was not ruining their plans.

(Not that I would complain if they had their pride broken and became much easier to use.)

The fact that there were still battlefields and duties to which the ideas of the modern clean wars did not apply was partially to leave areas to reeducate those who needed it.

A sense of tension was needed in all things.

If things grew too slack, people would begin thinking about profiting by committing crimes on the battlefield.

(Things have been quite boring lately, but that's how a war is supposed to be.)

An Object fired along the line she drew on her pen tablet. The expected costs achieved the expected results.

It was a war with no surprises and no sudden reversals.

She yawned while fighting, but then a small window appeared on top of the one displaying the results of the bombardment.

It informed her of an online meeting between other field officers.

Froleytia closed the war report that was merely a tedious part of her schedule and activated the online meeting application.

Such a meeting would normally be held between around 20 people, but only one other person was online. A familiar young female lieutenant colonel was wiping sweat from her brow with a handkerchief.

"U-um… Major Capistrano? You know that topic from before? Well, I wanted to let you know ahead of time that it will be up for discussion again."

"Lieutenant colonel, you are older than me and outrank me. Why are you speaking up to me?"

"N-no, no! I am nothing compared to you! Without you, I…no, not just me. My entire unit would be at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean right now! So please pay no heed to rank…"

Froleytia held her head in her hands, but then she remembered the camera function was on. She frantically straightened her spine instead. That could easily have been taken as disrespect.

But she was too slow.

The lieutenant colonel displayed on the screen was already in tears.

“Lieutenant colonel, what specific topic are you talking about?”

“Oh, um…” The lieutenant colonel wiped her tears away with the handkerchief. “It concerns the Dragon Killers Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell who worked under you.”

Froleytia took issue with that name that had clearly come from the tabloid sites, but she held her tongue because she had a feeling saying something would bring that superior officer to tears.

Instead, she asked, “That is up for discussion again? Don’t tell me they have caused yet another problem requiring they be sent somewhere else.”

“Um, yes. Had you already heard?”

Froleytia really, really wanted to hold her head in her hands, but she desperately resisted.

But the lieutenant colonel’s next words greatly exceeded what she had been expecting.

“It seems they have interfered with the succession of the royal Nikolaschka family. Every unit that is asked says they cannot handle the two, so it seems nowhere can be found to send them. And the higher ups are concerned they will defect to another world power if we discharge them. So could you take them back into the 37th?”

Afterword

This is the sixth volume. I wonder if this series has finally gotten long enough to require true courage to buy every volume at once.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This time, Quenser and Heivia were sent all over the place to force them outside of the usual framework of war. They experienced war near the very top where huge amounts of money are used to make use of Objects and war near the very bottom where deaths are not even officially recorded. …Which one do you think is worse?

I don't know if I should say "finally" or "at last" or what, but I actually showed some members of the royals who stand at the top of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

Killing hundreds of rank and file commoner soldiers is no big deal, but assassinating a single royal requires a tremendous amount of preparation. I hope that was enough to show you that even the protagonists' side has a twisted foundation to their society.

I felt I needed to have an Object worthy of those at the very top, so I used the Broad Sky Saber which was created from analysis of the Tri-Core of a different world power.

The idea of the laser space elevator appeared in Adoption War, but this was the first time for one to actually appear. It is called an elevator, but it is not actually physically connected by a wire. Similar technology actually exists, so anyone interested should go check it out. The real ones are only at an experimental stage though, so they are guided by a wire. Did you think it had enough impact to live up to the name of the third generation?

But there is no such thing as a perfect Object. The Broad Sky Saber here and the Break Carrier from Adoption War were both extreme long range types and their problem was in the targeting. They would probably be horribly matched against the Strategic Antenna that appeared in the magazine short story.

As you could probably tell from reading any one volume, the world of Heavy Object is a shitty world where the good are not rewarded and the evil are not punished.

I figured it would be hard for justice to win through in the end in a world like that, so I had a certain group head through the mud for three years this time.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagiryo-san and my editor Miki-san. All the different characters involved due to the main characters constantly getting sent to different places must have made this a troublesome novel to work on. I am truly thankful this time as well.

And I give my thanks to the readers. I started this series to show off the exhilaration of flesh-and-blood soldiers destroying a giant weapon, but it has made a lot of detours on its way to this sixth volume. I plan to continue pursuing that sense of exhilaration, so I hope you stay with me.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

I shall lay down my pen here.

I will leave the means of defeating the laser Object in Chapter 2 as a problem for you to work out.

-Kamachi Kazuma